Peace and Conflict/Conflict in the Pacific 1937 – 1951

Growth of Pacific Tensions

**Economic and Political issues in the Pacific by 1937**

- Japanese delegates to the Versailles conference came away feeling that their claims to equal power status with the other victorious allies had received a polite, but definite rebuke when their claims that a ‘racial equality clause’ be inserted in the final treaty were ignored. For its part, the USA refused to join the League of Nations and embarked on a policy of ‘isolationism’.
- There was a desire to avoid any entangling commitments that might draw the USA into future European quarrels. In Asia, however, the USA had a strong interest in maintaining the ‘Open Door’ free trade policy in China accompanied by a desire to avoid open conflict with Japan.

The Washington Naval Conference, November 1921 to February 1922

- Versailles Treaty. The conference originated as an American attempt to contain Japanese expansion and ended by shifting the strategic balance of power in the Pacific in favour of the Japanese.
- The key naval treaty limited the number and tonnage of battleships allowed to the USA. As both the USA and Britain had to spread their fleets, in the American case between two oceans, this gave Japan an advantage in the Pacific. Furthermore, Japan’s agreement to the battleship ratio was conditional on Britain and the USA agreeing to a scaling back of fortifications. Within the western Pacific they agreed not to establish or build up bases, with the exceptions of Hawaii, Singapore, and the Japanese home waters.

The Manchurian Incident, September 1931

- During the 1920s, Japan had been content to exercise influence in Manchuria through a semi-puppet warlord. However, the rise of Chinese nationalism under Chiang Kai-shek, and the gradual unification of the country in the later 1920s, posed an increasing challenge to Japan’s position on the mainland.
- On the evening of 18 September 1931, a bomb exploded on the South Manchurian Railway, near Mukden. The commander of the Kwantung Army (as the Japanese forces in Manchuria were called) mobilised his forces against this ‘Chinese aggression’.
- In fact, the bomb had been planted by Japanese officers to provoke an incident.
- By early 1932, the conquest of all Manchuria was completed. In March 1932, the ‘independent state’ of Manchukuo was proclaimed.
- On 27 March 1933, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations.

US isolationism and The Neutrality Acts

- The USA’s response to Japanese aggression in Manchuria was the Stimson Doctrine (1932). This declared that the USA would not officially recognise Manchukuo, or any arrangement imposed upon the Chinese by force.
- As the Depression bit deeper into American society, the isolationist spirit hardened, as the legislature debated the first of a series of Neutrality Acts in reaction to international crises.
The fourth Neutrality Act of 1937 reaffirmed the mandatory ban on arms and loans to countries at war and made American travel on belligerent vessels illegal. When Japan began its further advance into China in 1937, American government and public sympathies were firmly with the Chinese.

**Japanese Foreign Policy 1937-1941**

The Origins of Japanese Militarism

- Japanese foreign policy during this period rested on two main supports: a growing climate of militant nationalism, which had its origins in Japanese medieval culture, and a related desire to expand Japanese power and influence through a policy of regional imperialism.
- The Japanese observed how the major powers had carved out colonial empires from the Asian mainland or Asian–Pacific islands and felt that their attempts to do likewise should be accepted as a confirmation of their great power status, rather than condemned as illegal aggression, as had happened over Manchuria.

Military Organisation

- The prestige of the feudal samurai with his warrior code (bushido) gave way to a new system. There were two levels: privileged officers and the common soldiers. The absolute obedience of subordinates was enforced throughout the ranks.
- The military codes laid excessive emphasis on ‘spirit’, an attitude that continued despite advances in weaponry which ensured that victory on the battlefield was no longer determined by the bravery of soldiers.
- Training was rooted in deprivation and brutality. Privates in the Japanese Army had no rights and could expect to be humiliated and physically abused.

The shifting balance of power in Japan

- Three factors led to the shift in balance of power from the political parties to the military in interwar Japan. These were the world economic Depression; the emergence of Chinese nationalism, which threatened Japan’s position in Manchuria; and the rise of dictatorships in Europe.
- The Depression hit Japan severely, and blame fell on the political parties. It seemed significant that Germany, which had provided the constitutional model for Japan, had turned away from democracy and was adopting a more militaristic outlook.

**American and British policies in the Pacific 1937–41**

- Britain consistently underestimated Japan as a rival. There were grave doubts about Japan’s financial ability to support a large rearmament program, let alone fight a war, and it was felt that Japan lacked the skilled workers to produce modern armaments. Though these criticisms were couched in economic terms, British (and American) judgments were warped by a strong underlying sense of racism.

Britain, USA, and economic sanctions

- On 3 November 1938, Prime Minister Konoe announced the establishment of a ‘New Order in East Asia’, a grouping of Japan, China, and Manchukuo into one political, economic, and cultural bloc; and Japan also repudiated the Nine-Power Treaty concerning China signed in 1922.
- With the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, Britain was concerned to avoid causing further friction with Japan.
- In January 1940, the Americans abrogated their 1911 commercial treaty with Japan, opening the way to the possible imposition of trade embargoes.

The outbreak and course of the Pacific War

Strategic and political reasons for the attack

- By 1941, the Japanese were beginning to complain of an ‘ABCD’ encirclement: their nation being encircled by America, Britain, China, and the Dutch (in the East Indies). To break the impasse and maintain a steady supply of resources, it was necessary for Japan to expand southwards, though this would be at the risk of antagonising this quartet of powers.
- The key issue for Japan was oil. If a war were to be fought, Japan needed to have a secure source of fuel, which the Dutch East Indies provided, and the freedom to transport it by sea to the Japanese Homefront.
- The American decision to end oil exports to Japan in July 1941 brought matters to a head. No responsible Japanese leader believed that an attack on the American Pacific Fleet would ‘defeat’ America in a war.

From Pearl Harbor to Midway, December 1941 – June 1942

- Strikes were launched on the Malay Peninsula and against the Philippines as the Japanese pursued their strategic objective of establishing a zone of conquest.
- A defensive perimeter built along the islands of the Western Pacific would hold at bay the American fleet.
- The Americans would be starved of operational bases and a US naval attempt to link up with Australia or New Zealand would be exposed to air strikes from Japanese-occupied islands. Meanwhile, on the Asian mainland, Britain’s influence in Malaya, Burma, and perhaps even India would be challenged and overthrown.

The fall of the Philippines

- When the Japanese landed on Luzon on 22 December, MacArthur opted for a retreat into the Bataan Peninsula. The swift retreat of some 80 000 American and Filipino troops and 25 000 civilian refugees left them undersupplied. Thousands fell victim to scurvy, beriberi, malaria, and dysentery because of the lack of fresh food, clean water, and medicines.
- The Japanese found themselves with nearly 70 000 captives, 10 000 of them American, all suffering from months of siege and illness, as were the Japanese themselves.
- The captives began the Bataan death march, a 130-kilometre trek to crude prisoner-of-war (POW) camps. Japanese guards denied water to parched prisoners, clubbing, and bayoneting stragglers. Some 600 Americans and as many as 10 000 Filipinos died on the march. Thousands more perished in the filthy camps.

The fall of Singapore

- Even though pre-war British planning had suggested that the tropical forests of the Malay Peninsula would make any Japanese advance difficult and the use of tanks impossible, the Japanese made rapid progress southwards.
- The British and Commonwealth forces retreated to the island of Singapore and cut the causeway joining the island to the mainland across the narrow Johore Strait. The Japanese launched their attack across the Strait on 8 February. Lacking air defences, and faced with battle-hardened Japanese soldiers and tanks, the defenders, many of whom had only recently arrived in the island as reinforcements, surrendered on 15 February.
- As a result of the battle for Malaya, 130 000 British and Commonwealth troops became prisoners of war. In a campaign lasting just seventy days, the Japanese had driven the British out of Malaya and captured their main strategic fortress in the Far East.

The collapse of Burma

- The British Army in Burma retreated in front of the Japanese advance, and on 19 May, having crossed 960 kilometres of Burma in nine weeks, the survivors crossed the Indian frontier just as the arrival of the monsoon made further retreat impossible.
- About 4000 of the 30 000 British troops who had begun the campaign had perished.

The surrender of the Dutch East Indies

- In the face of the Japanese advance, a frantic effort was made to concentrate the Allied forces in the region into a coherent command. It was dubbed ABDA (American British Dutch Australian) and placed under the authority of the British General Wavell.
- At sea, the ABDA naval force, under the Dutch Admiral Doorman, met the Japanese in the battle of the Java Sea on 27–28 February 1942. Only four of the fourteen Allied ships that took part in the battle survived. Beaten at sea, the Dutch were also quickly forced to surrender on land. On 12 March, a formal surrender was signed at Bandung, on Java.

**Turning points of the war**

The Battle of the Coral Sea

- Flushed with success, the Japanese decided to extend the perimeter of their conquests by sending a fleet to land troops at Port Moresby on the southern coast of New Guinea. Having cracked the Japanese naval code, the Americans prepared a fleet of their own to intercept the invasion vessels.

The Battle of Midway

- Unaware that the Americans had cracked their naval code, a Japanese fleet of more than 200 vessels bore down on Midway Island in the last week of May 1942, its commanders believing that again they held the advantage of surprise, as they had at Pearl Harbor. In fact, the American carriers Yorktown, Enterprise, and Hornet rendezvoused to the north of Midway, intent on fighting an air action against the Japanese carriers.
- The battle, from 4–6 June, ended with the sinking of all four Japanese carriers. Japan would never make up the loss. Six fleet carriers would join the Japanese Navy in 1942–44, whereas America would launch eighty-nine carriers of various sizes.
The Battle of Guadalcanal

- Victory at Midway saw the development of an American offensive strategy. They were faced with two alternatives: to proceed along the southerly route of the East Indies Island chain, a strategy that would give emphasis to MacArthur and the army; or advance across the central Pacific, using Nimitz’s naval and Marine forces.

Civilians at War

Life for the peoples of South-East Asia under Japanese occupation

- The Japanese portrayed their conquest of South-East Asia as a liberation from European imperialism, and proceeded to reorganise the political, economic, and cultural life of the region. The slogan ‘Asia for the Asians’ was frequently heard, and in August 1940 the Greater East Asia Co-Prospereity Sphere was proclaimed.
- The reality of Japanese rule was quite different. Policy in relation to local peoples was more likely to be made by local commanders on the spot rather than administrators in Tokyo. The Japanese maintained a deep sense of their own racial superiority.
- Asian civilians provided a pool of forced labour. Between 1939 and 1945, approximately 670000 Koreans were taken to Japan to work in mines and heavy industry. Of these, approximately 70000 died. Korean and other Asian women were forced to work as ‘comfort women’ (prostitutes) for Japanese soldiers. As many as 300000 Javanese, Tamils, Malays, Burmese, and Chinese worked alongside Allied prisoners of war on the Burma–Siam railway. An estimated 90000 perished in the disease-ridden jungle.

Cultural changes

- Educational and cultural changes were introduced to reflect the view that Japan was to be used as the model for all Asian societies.
- Emperor worship and the Japanese language were universally stressed, and youth organisations were introduced to train young people to be useful subjects of the Japanese empire, physically and spiritually fit for any form of service. ‘Oriental morality’ and the ‘Imperial Way’ were to succeed materialistic Western culture and political liberalism.
- In the schools, emperor worship, Japanese language, music, religion, and history were stressed, and the ‘Japanese spirit’ extolled. This intensive Nipponisation during the three and a half years of Japanese rule produced a generation imbued to a degree with Japanese cultural values.

Economic changes

- Initially, Japanese policy in South-East Asia was to plunder the raw materials of the Co-Prospereity Sphere for the war effort, while making the region dependent on Japan for industrial goods.
- Malayan rubber, tin, bauxite, iron ore, and rice were heavily exploited, to the extent that rural self-sufficiency was destroyed, compelling peasants to depend upon government rationing. As shortages caused food prices to soar, the population turned to cultivation of foodstuffs for survival. The loss of life because of malnutrition was considerable.
Life under occupation

- Particularly savage was the treatment of Chinese. The rapes, murders and atrocities first seen on a large scale in Nanking in 1937 were repeated throughout Japanese-controlled China and Chinese overseas communities.

- Filled with a racially arrogant outlook, which regarded Chinese as inferior, the Japanese tortured, killed and recruited forced labour from among the Chinese population. In Manchuria, medical experiments were carried out on live patients by the notorious Unit 731. In attempting to consolidate their hold over north China, the Japanese introduced the 'Kill All, Burn All, Destroy All' policy that reduced the population in the area from 44 million to 25 million.

- After the collapse of Singapore in February 1942, the kempeitai (Japanese military police) ordered all male Chinese to be rounded up into five large concentration camps, in which local informers identified ‘hostile’ Chinese to the Japanese guards. This campaign spread to the mainland and resulted in the deaths of up to 40 000 Malay Chinese.

Comfort women

- Throughout their period of occupation of South-East Asia, the Japanese army provided ‘comfort stations’, at which young women were forced to have sex with Japanese soldiers.

- Around 200 000 young women served as sex-slaves in this way, about 80 per cent of them from Korea with others from China, the Philippines and Indonesia.

- The United Nations has estimated that only about 30 per cent of these women survived the war. The women were either forcibly taken from their families or recruited by deception and were forced to have sex with up to thirty men a day. Resistance would mean a beating, possibly to death.

Prisoners of war (POWs)

- The overwhelming impression in the literature concerning the prisoners of war of the Japanese is one of the deliberate and unjustifiable cruelty of the captors.

- Isolated acts of kindness stand out in a sea of inhumane behaviour, which ranged from a refusal to allow water, medical supplies, or food to sick or injured men through physical punishments with weapons or other objects to the cruellest tortures ending in death.

- Prisoners were held in camps throughout South-East Asia and the Pacific. In larger camps such as Changi on Singapore Island, it was possible for the prisoners to organise activities, such as educational classes, to occupy their time. In smaller camps, survival was a full-time occupation.

The effect of the Pacific War on the home fronts

JAPAN

- Unlike Germany, Japan never established a dictatorship. The Meiji Constitution was never revised or suspended. The Diet was rendered impotent, but it continued to exist. Despite these differences, Japanese fascism was no less effective in destroying political freedom. Threats and use of force by the police and the kempeitai (military police) were the ultimate weapons.

- The kempeitai broadened their mandate from military personnel to anyone and anything that might interfere with the war effort. Government monitoring of dissidence increased.
AUSTRALIA

- Japan’s activities in China had clearly added fuel to the traditional Australian fear of the ‘Asian menace’ to the north, but propaganda combined with racial arrogance to paint Singapore as the impregnable barrier to any Japanese expansion.
- Nevertheless, this dependence on Empire defence did not prevent Prime Minister Curtin’s famous reference to ‘looking to America’ in December 1941, reflecting a desire to encourage greater Australian–American cooperation in the Pacific, which had begun under his predecessor Robert Menzies

**End of the Conflict**

Reasons for the A-bomb

- It led to a quick end to World War II.
- It saved the lives of American soldiers.
- It potentially saved the lives of Japanese soldiers and civilians.
- It forced Japan to surrender, which it appeared unwilling to do.
- It was revenge for Japan’s attack at Pearl Harbor.
- It matched the brutality that Japan used during the war.

Reasons for Japanese defeat

- The Japanese economy could not compete with the industrial strength of the USA, the ‘arsenal of democracy’. The production of American aircraft, ships, submarines, and other weapons gave the Americans an ever-increasing advantage.
- The Japanese, blinded by their belief in their own racial superiority, underestimated the resolution of the Allies to fight on to victory.
- The Japanese High Command was wasteful in its use of troops. Time and again units were thrown into battles without any realistic hope of success.
- The Japanese medical systems and supplies to its soldiers were inadequate. Soldiers had to ‘live off the land’, a difficult proposition in jungle conditions. As a result, Japanese troops suffer sickness and malnutrition. In Burma in 1944, for example, there were 24,680 Japanese battle casualties, but 541,575 casualties from infection and disease.

War Crimes Tribunals and The Status of the Emperor

- The Potsdam Declaration had promised that ‘stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals. Hasty proceedings in the Philippines had led to the execution of generals Yamashita and Homma for atrocities committed by troops under their command before the International Military Tribunal for the Far East was formally inaugurated by MacArthur on 19 January 1946.
- The original American lists of approximately 100 potential war criminals and the British list of eleven were combined to produce a final list of twenty-eight. The trials began on 3 May 1946 and continued for thirty-one months. Eleven justices from the Allied powers presided at Tokyo.
- By majority decision, seven former Japanese leaders went to the gallows. Sixteen were sentenced to life imprisonment, one to twenty years, and one to seven years. Five of the convicted ‘Class A’ prisoners died in prison, but none of the others served out their terms.
The former foreign minister Shigemitsu was released in 1950 and returned to politics as soon as the occupation ended. The remaining twelve were paroled between 1954 and 1956.

- Emperor Hirohito acceded to the Japanese throne in 1926, and ruled Japan in war and peace until his death in 1989.
- The war, he said, had been begun to ensure the survival of Japan and the stability of Asia, not out of any aggressive intent. He painted Japan’s surrender as an act that might save humanity from annihilation, pointing out that ‘the enemy has for the first time used cruel bombs to kill and maim extremely large numbers of the innocent’.
- On New Year’s Day 1946, the emperor renounced his divinity in an address to the nation printed in the newspapers. MacArthur welcomed the declaration, identified the emperor as a leader of democratisation and indicated that he would continue to be so in the future. Concerning other leaders of Japan’s war effort, the Allies were not so forgiving.

**Allied occupation of Japan to 1951**

- The first contingent of Allied Forces arrived in Japan on 28 August 1945. These were Americans, who were to make up the vast majority of the almost one million servicemen who served at one time or another in the army of occupation. There was also a small force of approximately 40 000 men drawn from Australia, Britain, India, and New Zealand, who made up the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF).

**The BCOF**

- Rivalry for leadership of the BCOF arose between Australia and Britain. H. V. Evatt, the Australian minister for external affairs, felt that Australia’s place as the leading Commonwealth nation in the region, enhanced by its role in fighting the Japanese, should not be overlooked, so when advance units of the BCOF arrived on 8 February 1946, they were commanded by the Australian Lieutenant-General John Northcott, and were assigned the military control of the Hiroshima prefecture.
- The duties of the BCOF were to locate and dispose of armaments, patrol the seas to prevent the smuggling of illegal immigrants and goods for the black market, supervise the repatriation of returning Japanese soldiers and Allied POWs to their homelands, and assist in reconstruction.

**Life of Occupation forces**

- The spontaneous distribution of chocolates and chewing gum by the GIs, and the help offered in times of natural disaster, such as the earthquake of December 1946, were welcomed by the Japanese.
- The members of the occupation forces—military, civilian, and their dependants—lived a life of privilege that belied the ideal of democracy being preached to the Japanese.
- Numerous facilities were declared off limits to Japanese. The Japanese were required to pay for the maintenance of the occupation army.
- While some 3.7 million families still lacked housing of their own, by 1948 the government was required to direct a substantial portion of its budget to providing housing and facilities for the conquerors—and ensuring that these met American living standards. While war widows begged for relief, the government paid the expenses of Americans wishing to modernise their accommodation with modern electrical appliances.
- While Japanese travelled in crowded railway carriages, the government was forced to run exclusive occupation army trains, often not full, for the free use of the occupation personnel.