

The Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945)

World War II in Asia is commonly thought to have begun after Imperial Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. But what many in the West don't realize is that war had already been waging in Asia for about a decade prior. What we now refer to as the Asia-Pacific War began on September 18, 1931, when the Imperial Japanese Army invaded and occupied Manchuria, an area in northeastern China. However, while the Invasion of Manchuria officially marked the start of the war, the roots of the conflict can be found in the decades prior to this culminating event.

DID YOU KNOW that the Second World War occurred in Asia as well as in Europe? Did you also know that what we refer to as the Second World War was actually just one phase of a much longer war that occurred in Asia between 1931 and 1945, called the Asia-Pacific War?

Context and Causes

In the mid- to late-1800s, Japan was in a period of transition out of self-imposed isolation and was trying to establish itself on the world stage. This proved difficult, as Japan is a small island country with few natural resources. Additionally, by this time in history much of Asia had already been colonized by Western powers, and the West's overwhelming military and technical strength posed an increasingly significant threat. Faced with this situation, Japan decided to "modernize" itself by introducing a capitalist economy, bolstering its military, and acquiring foreign markets and territories.

Thus, the late 1800s marked the beginning of Japan's imperial conquests, including an attempt to colonize Korea that led to the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Japan's military, now equipped with imported arms and ships, defeated Chinese land and sea forces in Korea, Manchuria and the Yellow Sea. The peace treaty forced on China awarded the Japanese government a payment in damages worth five times the Japanese annual budget, as well as possession of Taiwan. A decade later, the UK and the US supported Japan in its war with Russia in 1904-1905. After this war, Japan extended its colonial presence, gaining control over parts of the Liaotung Peninsula of Manchuria and over the southern half of Sakhalin Island of Russia, and obtaining complete control over Korea (officially annexed in 1910). Yet another decade later, Japan took part in the First World War (1914-1918), and from it acquired former German properties in China.

The Asia-Pacific War Breaks Out

On September 18, 1931, Japanese military officers planted a bomb on the Southern Manchurian railway and blamed the incident on Chinese soldiers. The Imperial Japanese Army used this fabricated incident as an excuse for invading Manchuria, a move that historians designate as the start of the Asia-Pacific War. The area was turned into a Japanese puppet state called Manchukuo in 1932. The League of Nations condemned Japan for this aggression, and in response Japan withdrew from the League in 1933. A few years later, in 1937, Japan, Germany and Italy formed the Axis Powers.

On July 7th, 1937, Japan used a conflict between Chinese and Japanese troops around the Marco Polo Bridge at the outskirts of Beijing, as a pretext to launch an all-out but undeclared war against China, taking Shanghai and then Nanking (now called Nanjing), China's capital at the time. During a 6 to 8-week period, Imperial soldiers reportedly killed tens of thousands of captured soldiers and civilians, and brutally treated and raped women and children. This massacre became known as the Rape of Nanking.

Having occupied many parts of China, and with the war in Europe having broken out in 1939, Japan looked to the rest of Asia to secure an independent supply of natural resources. Japan thus continued imperial expansion in Asia under the guise of "liberating" Asia from Western domination, committing horrific atrocities and

crimes against humanity along the way. These atrocities included mass slaughters, Japanese military sexual slavery, the use of human experimentation in its biochemical warfare development, germ warfare attacks in China, the forced labor of POWs and civilians, and more.

When the Imperial Japanese forces started moving into Indochina in 1940-1941, Western countries began to act. This included the US, the UK and Canada imposing economic sanctions against Japan. Japan thus decided that to win control over Asia, it would need to confront the United States. On December 7, 1941, Imperial Japanese forces attacked US bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and the Philippines. At the same time, Japanese forces also launched an assault against Commonwealth forces in Hong Kong and Malaya.

The End of the War

Armed resistance to the Imperial Japanese Army in China and other occupied countries, the US's economic and technological superiority, and the joint efforts of the Allied Forces took its toll on Imperial Japan, putting it on the defensive by 1944. But the end of the war didn't come until the summer of 1945, when the US, with the support of UK and Canada, dropped two atomic bombs on Japan. The first one fell on Hiroshima on August 6 and the second one on Nagasaki on August 9. This led to Imperial Japan officially surrendering on August 15, putting an end to 14 years of war in Asia.

