

## MODERN HISTORY

### Conflict in the Pacific 1937-1941

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***“Evaluate the impact of Japanese imperialism on Asian people in occupied territories in the period up to 1945.”***

The social, economic and political impacts of Japanese imperialism on Asian people in occupied territories up to 1945 are generally negative. Japan’s claim that the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was driven by their desire to aid and liberate other Asian countries wears thin upon the examination of primary and secondary sources. Their expansionist motives were instead economic and political, which is reflected through the Japanese Imperial Army’s gross violations of human rights. Millions of Asians under Japanese rule were subjected to social indoctrination, racial repression, human experimentation, forced labour, sexual exploitation and made prisoners of war, resulting in countless deaths. National economies crumbled and communities were divided between collaboration and resistance. Despite this, the Japanese occupation stoked the fires of many nationalist movements, provided military training and liberation from colonial rule, which was a significant step towards gaining independence.

Japanese imperialism in occupied territories from 1937 to 1945 led to immeasurable social implications. As in other dictatorships, hatred and fear became commonplace. Civilians were manipulated by false promises of equality as Japanese treatment was “brutal, repressive and never upheld the ideals of pan-Asian brotherhood” (W.G. Beasley). All western social and cultural influences were systematically removed to encourage popular belief that the Co-Prosperity Sphere was being ‘spiritually renovated’ and that ‘traditional Oriental principles’ could only now be experienced.

In countries such as the Philippines, where there was a considerable pro-American (or western) sentiment, basic human rights such as freedom of speech and press were overridden by political propaganda and social indoctrination, set up to defame the West. American music and movies were banned and street names were changed because Americans was perceived as “enemies in racial terms and hypocrites, who would not admit to their own greed in wanting to control Asia” (Sean Sheehan). Propaganda leaflets were distributed saying, “*Open your eyes and see what America has done to you so far. You have been abused, exploited and neglected*” (Alan Pollock). Ironically, this highlighted any previous racially inferior treatment because despite Japan’s ‘Asia for the Asians’ promises, their imperialistic actions caused many people, (such as Indonesians), to soon think that their “new masters were worse than the old” (John Legge).

Prior to the invasion of the Dutch East Indies, Japanese propaganda spread the prophecy of Joyoboyo. Indonesians were told that Java would only be free after white men occupied Java for 300 years and the yellow men ruled for an ‘age of maize’. Come 90 days, independence did not occur. ‘Japan-isation’ instead banned the Indonesian anthem and all political organisations. Crops were seized and racial superiority maintained as the Japanese flag, calendar and education system were imposed. As the tide turned against the Japanese, social indoctrination lightened and Bahasa Indonesia became the official language in the Dutch East Indies. This was a huge achievement for the nationalist movement and a step towards independence and recognition.

Japanese-style neighbourhood organisations were set up as a form of social control, organising food rationing and eradicating any anti-Japanese sentiment. ‘Kempeitai,’ a secret police, similar to the Nazi ‘Gestapo, formed and their torturous interrogation processes were widely feared, particularly in the Dutch East Indies. Youth organisations and women’s groups were also created to encourage admiration by younger generations towards the Japanese.

Social indoctrination and cultural oppression was particularly harsh in Korea and their spirit of independence was soon lost. From 1937, a policy of assimilation ('Japan and Korea as One') was adopted. Japanese education, language, and Shinto and Confucian practices were imposed and citizens were encouraged to adopt a Japanese name (by 1940, 84% of all Korean families had changed their name). As Japanese censorship tightened, Korean newspapers and magazines were prohibited, cultural figures were destroyed and artefacts forcibly taken. It was Japan's aim to "eradicate consciousness of Korean national identity and roots and thus obliterate the very existence of the Korean people from the face of the earth" (Ki-baik Lee).

Racial oppression and brutal treatment by the Japanese Imperial Army was widespread throughout occupied territories. Japanese soldiers believed, according to Bushido that "whatever they did during WWII, they had behind the authority of absolute divine initiative" (D.C. Holtom). Emperor Hirohito sanctioned a "Kill All, Burn All and Loot All" policy towards the Chinese and historians, such as Mitsuyoshi Himeta, record that this resulted in "more than 2.7million" deaths of Chinese civilians. An account by a Japanese soldier during the 'Rape of Nanking' reveals such Japanese notions of superiority and racial prejudice: *"One day Second Lieutenant Ono said to us: 'you have never killed anyone yet, so today we shall have some killing practice. You must not consider the Chinese as a human being, but something of rather less value a dog or cat' "* (Stuart Fewster). Following Japan's capture of Nanking (December 13<sup>th</sup> 1937), hundreds of thousands of civilians were shot, bayoneted, tortured, and made prisoner of war by the Japanese Imperial Army. Despite this event remaining a contentious political issue due to varied historical perspectives, the immeasurable social and economic impacts upon the Chinese victims are clear. "One historian has estimated that if the dead were stacked on top of each other, these bodies would reach the height of a seventy-four-story building," (Iris Chang) while other accounts by Japanese officials argue that the death toll was "military in nature and that no such crimes ever occurred" (Dana R. Dillon).

Other examples of racial oppression and brutality occurred in Singapore where up to five thousand Chinese were forced to the beach and machine-gunned by the Japanese. In New Guinea, tens of thousands died as their land was bombed and "all the clans, where once brave, courageous, and strong seemed to become like babies in their first day out of their mothers' wombs" (Sean Sheehan).

Japan's victorious conquest (1941-1942) resulted in the 'legal' capture of millions of prisoners of war (POW's), since the Geneva Convention had not been ratified into their domestic law. They "disregarded international law and treated their prisoners with a brutality which brought on them the odium of the civilized world" (Alan Pollock). Bushido attitude did not recognize POW's, thus victims were subjected to poor conditions and torture, "usually in an effort to gather military intelligence quickly" (De Jong, Louis). Starvation, malaria and other diseases were inevitable. The Bataan Death March (April 1942) is one of the most notorious examples of Japanese brutality towards POW's. Over 75,000 American and Filipino's were forced to march 105 km and were systematically bashed, robbed, bayoneted, mistreated and stabbed. Although the exact death count is impossible to know, 54,000 were predicted to have reached the camp and 7,000-10,000 died on the way (75% being Filipino).

Written reports and testimonies collected by the Australian War Crimes Section of the Tokyo Tribunal (investigated by prosecutor William Webb) reveal that Japanese personnel committed acts of cannibalism in many parts of the Co-Prosperity Sphere. This involved murder for the purpose of securing bodies and cutting flesh from living people. Lance Naik, an Indian prisoner of war testified in New Guinea that *"every day one prisoner was taken out and killed and eaten by the soldiers... their flesh was cut from their bodies while they were alive and they were thrown into a ditch where they later died"*.

The Japanese Imperial Army developed a "system of institutionalized military slavery for women" (Amnesty International). These 'comfort women' were enslaved against their will and repeatedly tortured, raped and brutalized for months on end. Given the open nature of prostitution in Japan,

'comfort stations' emerged after the Manchuria incident (1931) because "it was seen as logical that there should be organized prostitution to serve the Japanese Armed Forces" (George Hicks). The Japanese hoped that they would prevent "venereal diseases and rape by Japanese soldiers, provide comfort to soldiers and head off espionage" (George Hicks). However, according to Japanese historian Yoshiaki Yoshimi, the first two problems were instead aggravated: "the Japanese Imperial feared most that the simmering discontent of the soldiers could explode into riot and revolt. That is why it provided women".

Gordon Thomas (a prisoner in Rabaul, PNG) documented that woman working in brothels "most likely served 25 to 35 men a day" (Hank Nelson) and the majority of the victims were under 20, some as young as 12. Survivors lost any hope of leading a normal life after the war was over, due to the severe physical and psychological impacts: "*I was systematically beaten and raped day and night. Even the Japanese doctor raped me each time he visited the brothel to examine us for venereal disease*" (Yohei Kono). Some woman's wombs were so bad that they had to be injected with number 606, which made them sterile. Sick women were taken to a cave and later blown-up. The International Military Tribunal for the Far East reports that during Japan's 'Rape of Nanking' (December 1937), an estimated 20,000 women were raped, including infants and elderly. Acts of incest were also forced upon families: "sons were forced to rape their mothers; fathers were forced to rape their daughters" (Robert Edgerton). A diary account (17th December 1937) by Jonh Rabe, who was the leader of the Safety Zone, reveals that "*the whole Japanese army seems to be free to go and come as they please...last night up to 1,000 women and girls are said to have been raped. If husbands or brothers intervene, they're shot*" (John Woods).

According to Yoshimi, there were over 2,000 'Comfort stations' located throughout occupied territories. He believes that Imperial Army's medical records for venereal disease treatment (1940) reflect the "general makeup of the total comfort women population: Korean Women comprised 51.8%, Chinese 36% and Japanese 12.2%." Many Filipino, Indonesian and European women also worked. Due to the lack of official documentation, the total number of 'comfort women' is difficult to estimate however, based on surviving documents estimates have been concluded. Yoshimi estimated between 50,000 and 200,000 and the BBC 200,000 to 300,000. Although severe violations of human rights and social issues are evident due to Japanese imperialism (1937-45), international law, ad hoc tribunals and apologies made by the Japanese government have not been effective in resolving these issues.

Japan's imperialistic motives behind the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' were largely based on their economic aims and war needs because unlike Singapore, Malaya and The Dutch East Indies, Japan was not rich in natural resources. This resulted in severe economic, resource and social issues. Following their victories in the Sino-Japanese Wars (1937), their foreign policy was focused on economic and political strength. This imperialistic strategy, built on a "pattern of industrialization dominated by a handful of foreign firms, exploiting cheap energy and natural resources" (W.G. Beasley) could potentially achieve their objectives.

Policies emerged (such as Ishiwara's Five Year Plan) to create manufacturing and railway industries in conquered territories, as all trade and resources were directed towards Japan. For example in Indonesia, Malaya and Indochina, rice crops and other foods were confiscated for the Japanese army and country. This created a focus on the production of war related materials, instead of staple foods, resulting in death and poverty: "Poverty, poverty, poverty, for all but a few henchmen of the Japanese and a number of black marketers" (Dan Van Mook). The Indochina famine (1944-45), resulted in an estimated of two million Vietnamese (10% of the population) deaths and four million<sup>1</sup> in the Dutch East Indies, due to famine and forced labor.

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<sup>1</sup> Dower, John W. War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (1986; Pantheon;

Such poverty and famine also resulted from the national economies being destroyed in Thailand, Malaya and the Philippines. Currencies within these countries became worthless as the Japanese army issued uncontrollable amounts of military script (paper money). Prices spiraled out of control and an active black market emerged due to extensive shortages.

Economically, Korea was severely affected as their economy was forced to reorganize onto a war footing during the second Sino-Japanese war (1937) and all raw materials were diverted to Japanese trade. Korean youths were enlisted into Japanese army as volunteers (1938) and conscripts in 1943 (over 22,000 Koreans died fighting for the Japanese in WWII).

Japanese war-related industries required forced labor by Indonesians, Burmese and Filipinos. Laborers experienced similar social issues as POW's though were also subjected to brutal working conditions. The construction of the Thai-Burma railway highlights Japan's exploitation and brutality towards Asian people. From June 1942 to November 1943, approximately 180,000 Asian labourers and POW's (mainly from Burma, Malaya, Thailand and the East Indies) were coerced by the Japanese military to work on the 415 km railway supply line between Bangkok, Thailand and Burma. The plight of Asian prisoners is depicted through the diary account of POW Dr. Hardie: "*Corpses rotting, unburied in the jungle, almost a complete lack of sanitation*" (Alan Pollock). There were approximately 240 native deaths per mile and 90,000 Asian deaths as a direct result of the project. Some of these workers were Romusha labourers (over 10 million Indonesians worked for the Japanese) who were "provided with insufficient food, very few medicines and inadequate nursing staff" (Tan Malaka). Only 52,000 were repatriated to Java, meaning that there was a death rate of 80%.

Chinese civilians and POW's were also subjected to human experimentation and biological warfare for economic purposes. Unit 731 was one of the most infamous and victims were "subjected to vivisection without anesthesia, amputations, and were used to test biological weapons" (Nicholas Kristof). After experimentation, patients were killed with an injection (which caused 3,000 deaths<sup>2</sup>) and diseased prisoners were locked up with healthy ones to test how quickly symptoms spread.

In Indochina, Malaya and Burma, destruction of infrastructure (roads, bridges, mines, railways, oilfields, medical clinics) from Japanese bombings and lootings was widespread, resulting in economic and social issues. Cases of looting have been accounted by historians as being "organized on a massive scale to ensure that as many of the proceeds as possible went to the government" (Peggy Seagrave). Therefore Japan's imperialism within occupied territories (1937-1945) had devastating effects upon the country's economy, resources and people.

Political upheavals divided the occupied territories between those who chose to collaborate with Japan's imperialist notions and those who joined resistance movements. This 'choice' depended upon the social, political, geographic and religious nature of each individual, community and country. In some countries, such as in the Dutch East Indies, the Japanese were seen as liberators from European colonial rule and oppression. The Japanese realized that the success of their propaganda 'Triple A Movement' ("Japan, the light of Asia. Japan, the leader of Asia. Japan, the protector of Asia") was reliant upon cooperation with nationalist leaders. Thus Sukarno was immediately released from his exile in Flores and his role as "a skilful mediator standing between his people and their Japanese overlords" (John Legge) began. His role as a collaborator was less admirable by his critics, as it contradicted his long-standing principle of 'non-cooperation'. He justified this as collaboration being the "only way to future independence" (John Legge). He was lastingly ashamed of his involvement in the propaganda stunt (1944) when he and other white-collar workers volunteered as Rumusha labourers. This rallied thousands of volunteer workers, which resulted in almost certain death.

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<sup>2</sup> GlobalSecurity.org, 2005: "Biological Weapons Program".

As in other occupied territories the “occupation fed the flames of nationalism” (Calocoressi) in the East Indies. This was the most important political impact of the occupation because within ten years of the conflict in the Pacific, Asia had largely been decolonized. Japan’s “Asia For Asian” promises provoked nationalist movements to collaborate with the belief that this would lead to full independence. A division of labour took place between Sukarno and Hatta who served the Japanese and reduced the harshness of their rule, while other leaders (Sjahrir) worked underground to develop networks of resistance.

The Japanese allowed the formation of nationalist organizations such as the volunteer army Peta (formed October 1943), which proved to be very important when the allied forces returned because in 1945 the army had over two million units. Similarly, collaboration in Burma resulted in the formation of the ‘Burma Independence Army’ or ‘Aung San’s’ army, which was sent to Japan to receive military training. In return, a puppet government was created which gave Burma limited independence (this political situation was similar in the Philippines).

Tactical goals were achieved in the East Indies through the creation of the PUTERA (9<sup>th</sup> March, 1943), which gave Sukarno formal standing through his chairman position. His involvement in local councils (through the Central Advisory Council, September 1942) was also important because “they would provide machinery through which the government of the republic could extend its authority” (John Legge). His speeches for the first time reached the villagers via radio. He traveled freely laying down bases of power to come into effect when Japanese authority was withdrawn. As the tides turned for Japan, many nationalist leaders, such as Sukarno were promised independence by the Japanese (achieved on 17<sup>th</sup> August 1945).

In response, remarkably large guerrilla resistance movements formed (originating in the countryside) throughout the Sphere and were most prominent in the Philippines, Indochina and Malaya. In the Philippines, a major resistance force was the Hukbalahap (“People’s Army Against the Japanese”), under the leadership of communist Luis Taruc. Over 30,000 people were armed who extensively fought the Japanese in central and northern Luzon. They used tactics of sabotage, capturing outposts and confiscating land (which would then be redistributed to peasants): “They flee whenever we attack...by cutting electric wires, kidnapping people and burning homes...they draw out our forces and fire on us unexpectedly” (S. Falk). They provided valuable intelligence to U.S. forces and encouraged a social revolution. The Japanese responded with anger: “Suspected resistance members were sometimes tied to telephone poles in the boiling sun. Hostages were taken and executed after raids on Japanese positions” (Alan Pollock). As such the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia delayed some countries (such as the Philippines) progress towards independence. Despite this, the rise of nationalist movements and liberation from western colonial rule can be regarded politically as a positive step towards independence.

In conclusion, Japanese imperialist policies driven by ultranationalism during their occupation of South East Asia up until 1945 had disastrous social, economic and political impacts. The ‘Japanisation’ process of terror, exploitation and discrimination scared each country and their people. Though it needs to be remembered that Japan was beginning to lose a war, as allied propaganda soon began to depict the region as the ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.’ Despite the gross violations of human rights and millions of deaths, which are never to be forgotten, during the occupation military units were developed and power was given to nationalist movements, which fuelled each South East Asian countries steps towards gaining independence.