

# **UnVeiled History**

World War II

World War II in Asia

Topics Covered:

Japanese Invasions

&

Japanese War Crimes

## World at War: Asia

### **Before Reading the Summary**

Ask the class what they already know about what happened in World War II.

\_\_\_\_\_ Have you heard about the Holocaust? Hitler? The Nazis? You may have learned about Germany during World War II and how the United States aided in winning the war. But, do you know what happened in Asia at the same time?

### *The Economic State of Japan (1931-1945)*

In order to recover from the Great Depression (1929-1939), an economic global catastrophe, many countries tried to grow their economy through the use of special rules, colonies, and **spheres of influence**. Japan was one country that put high **tariffs** in place and utilized trade manipulations to limit the **import** of industrial products from America and Europe. They also colonized Korea, Taiwan, and **Manchuria** to gain access to raw materials and heavy industry. However, Japan could not find oil and rubber in the land that it controlled, thus it had to receive oil from the U.S. and rubber from British Malaya. This was important because the U.S. was able to put pressure on the Japanese navy, who needed the oil to fuel their ships during critical war time, through an **embargo**. Without access to oil and foreign trade, Japan had two choices: hold off on their Southeast Asia occupation and wait for the oil restriction to loosen or take control of the oil and natural resources of Southeast Asia and anger the Western countries possibly into war.

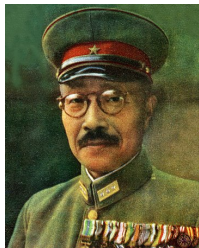
### *Japanese Government*



The government was dominated by the military and shaped the public's opinion by influencing schools, the media, and the police. At home and abroad in the Asian countries Japan occupied, Japanese propaganda displayed racial superiority of the Japanese and vilified the atrocities of Western countries. Japan promoted a concept called the "East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere," where the Japanese Empire was portrayed as the liberators of Western imperialist rule and would control Asia instead of the Western counterparts. Posters, leaflets, and films spread these messages. For instance, to unify Japanese support for the war, *The Opium War* film showcased the evils of the British during the Opium War and portrayed Japan as China's savior. The film was very popular in Japan and demonstrated the power of film to reach large audiences and exhibit the main ideas of propaganda.



Serving as the longest-reigning Japanese monarch, **Emperor Hirohito** ruled during WWII and was considered as a divine figure. Although most historical accounts and sources indicate the emperor's lack of involvement in wartime strategy, according to Herbert P. Bix's biography on Emperor Hirohito, Hirohito actively made decisions, such as approving the use of chemical weapons in China and rejecting the nomination of Konoe to allow General Hideki Tōjō to undertake the role as prime minister in 1941.



As prime minister, **General Hideki Tōjō** rejected the American counter-proposal for peace and signed off on the attack on Pearl Harbor, actively engaging in wartime decisions. He controlled the army, foreign affairs, commerce, education, and military equipment. He continued the implementation of a national curriculum focusing on militarism and nationalism.

### *The Second Sino-Japanese War*



On July 7, 1937, the day of the Marco Polo (or Lugou) Bridge Incident, the Japanese were in military training, shooting gunpowder at a bridge that led to Beijing. Chinese troops, not given any notice of the training, attacked the Japanese, leading to a string of conflicts, including the Battle of Beijing at Tianjin (July), the Battle of Shanghai (August), the Battle of Taiyuan (September), and the Battle of Nanking (December). Battles and bombings continued into 1938 and 1939.

Watch this video on the Battle of Taiyuan: [70 seconds, 70 years: Battle of Taiyuan in 1937](#)

### *Japanese Atrocities*

#### *The Nanking Massacre*

In December of 1937, in the Nanking Massacre (also known as the Rape of Nanking) the Japanese performed unspeakable atrocities upon the people of China. 20,000 to 80,000 women were sexually assaulted, buildings were looted and burned, people were mass murdered and hunted. About 200,000 to 300,000 people died during this incident.



Outside of Nanking, other horrible events occurred. The Japanese tricked young women from Korea, China, the Philippines, and surrounding Asian countries and forced them into sexual slavery after falsely offering them opportunities to work in factories. Instead, they were, in essence, kidnapped and were raped daily in the 2,000 “comfort stations” around Asia. Known as “comfort women,” only a handful of these women are still alive today, suffering from the trauma of their

experiences. The Japanese government has yet to provide a proper apology to these women, creating tensions between and within the modern Asian governments, especially in Korea as there is public unrest due to the government’s inaction in the matter.

Furthermore, it has been difficult to forget how the Japanese mass murdered millions of people in Asia. Prisoners of War (POWs) faced 130-mile death marches and could not access basic needs under Japanese control. Some were used as targets for gun practice or beheaded. The Japanese Army Unit 731 experimented on Chinese and Russian POWs, removing organs and purposely spraying salt water onto POWs to cause frostbite in the “name of science.” Also, according to witnesses and official documents, some Japanese soldiers ate the corpses of prisoners and enemies, not because they lacked supplies, but as a method of displaying their power.

### *The Missing Details of Pearl Harbor*



By 1940, the Japanese had invaded Manchuria, China, and French Indochina. The American government, angry at the Japanese, placed an embargo to limit Japan’s access to U.S. steel and oil. President Roosevelt hoped this would pressure Japan from continuing to invade countries of East Asia. Without oil, the Japanese navy would only be able to run for another 6

months. Thus, the Japanese hoped to conquer British and Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia to access the oil, rubber, and other materials it needed to continue their plan of controlling Asia. The Japanese knew the troops on the U.S. mainland were too far away from Japan to launch an attack any time soon. The only force that was close enough was the American Pacific fleet in Hawaii. At the time, the U.S. did not want to fight in the war to preserve their policy of isolationism, so Japan took the risk of trying to destroy the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, hoping the U.S. would give up and allow Japan to continue to capture East Asia. Unfortunately, the Japanese miscalculated and received the opposite reaction they were hoping for. Soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. joined the war.

### *Vocab*

**Tariff** - a tax on imports or exports (products coming in or out) between countries

**Embargo** - a ban on trade, a country, or product with a specific country

**Manchuria** - an area that is now northeastern China

**Import** - goods and services that bought and brought into one country but are made in foreign countries

**Sphere of Influence** - an area or country that is heavily influenced by the power and decisions of a foreign country but is not officially controlled by the foreign country

## Primary Sources

Oral Histories of the “Comfort Women”

[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/korea/comfort\\_women.pdf](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/korea/comfort_women.pdf)

- Start from the beginning until “often had no time to sleep.”

Video Accounts Related to this Topic

- ❑ [Life As A “Comfort Woman”: Story of Kim Bok-Dong | STAY CURIOUS #9](#)
- ❑ [Former 'comfort woman' recalls horrors](#) (CNN)

The Chinese Medical Journal

<https://www.archives.gov/files/iwg/japanese-war-crimes/select-documents.pdf>

- Start from “Whether or not...” until “could be discovered.”

## Discussion Questions

### **After Reading the Summary**

1. What is one new fact that you learned?
2. What were some colonies that Japan had?
3. How was the U.S. able to influence Japan?
4. Who controlled the Japanese government?
5. What is one thing the Japanese did to the people of Asia?
6. Why did the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor?
7. What mistake did the Japanese make when attacking Pearl Harbor?
8. What surprised you the most?

## Visuals



Map of the "Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" in a Japanese propaganda booklet (1943)

Source: <https://history.mit.edu/subjects/world-war-ii-asia>



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### *Images:*

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