

HTY 498—Fall 2016

# The Moral Spirit

Japan's National Gamble, 1941

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IN LATE 1941, the Empire of Japan's armies controlled a territory on the eastern Asian mainland larger than the home islands themselves, the fruit of an expansionist effort that had been underway for the previous decade.

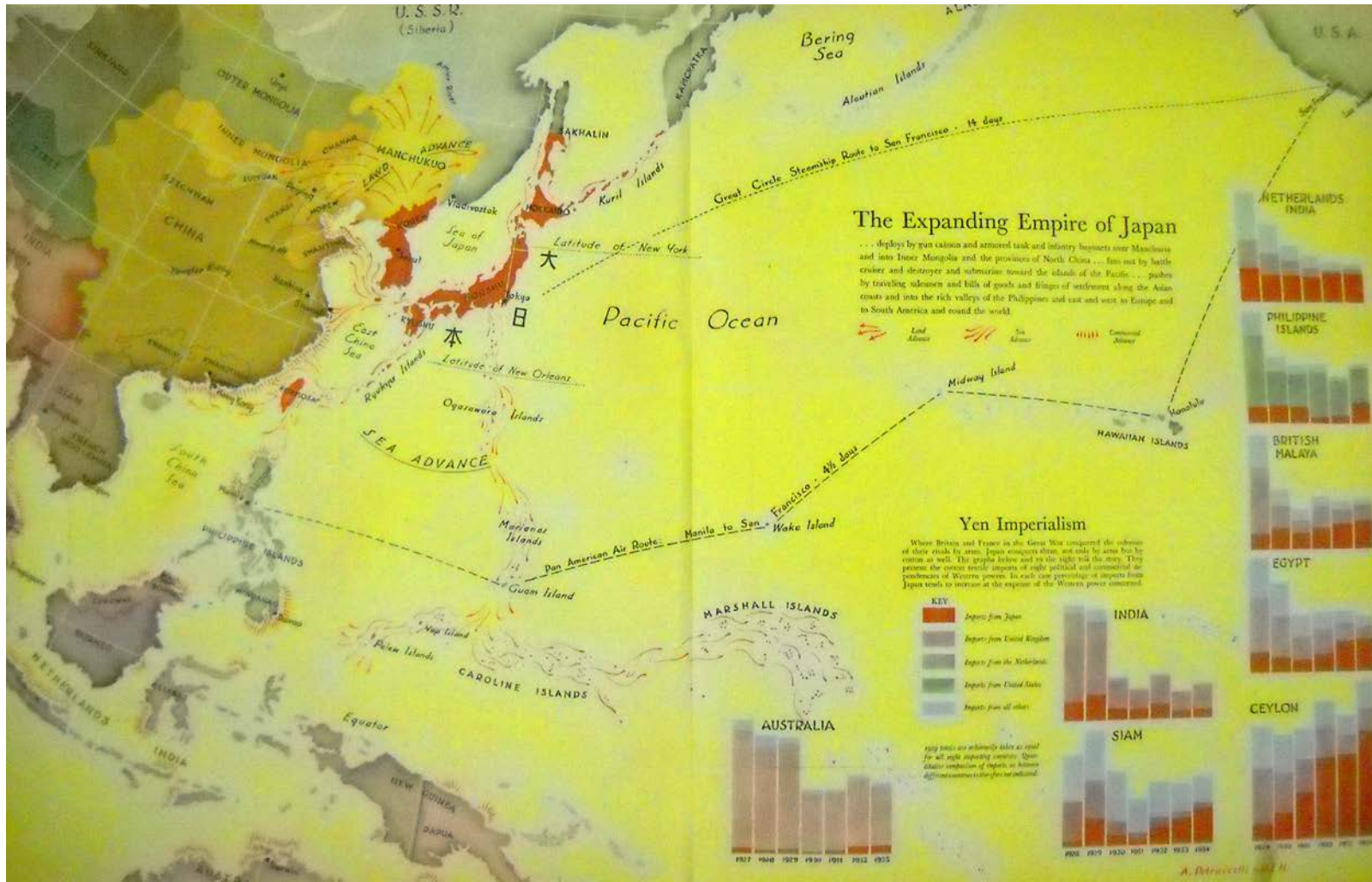


Figure 1 The Expanding Empire of Japan, map by Petrucci and Harrison. *Fortune*, Sept. 1936

Japan had been at war with the Republic of China since 1937, and militarily involved on the Asian mainland since 1931. The Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), among the most modern and powerful in the world, dominated much of the western Pacific—somewhat to the discomfiture of its old mentor, Britain's Royal Navy, after which it was modeled in many respects, and which now eyed it warily from the British East Asian strongholds at Hong Kong and Singapore. Since September 1940, Japan had been party to an alliance with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy intended (by those parties, at least) to give the United States another reason not to involve itself in the war in Europe. Through Germany, Japan had pressured Vichy France into permitting Japanese troops into French Indochina (present-day Vietnam). Negotiations over the American response to Japan's military actions in East Asia had been dragging on for months, each side suspecting the other of playing for time and planning aggression, but neither quite willing to abandon the effort. For all those reasons, Japanese-American relations—never the most comfortable international relationship in the world—were fraught, and had been for some time.

Nevertheless, the Empire appeared to have little to gain from war with the United States, and even its own leaders recognized, as we shall see, that it had a great deal to lose. And yet, on December 8 (Tokyo time), Japan intentionally undertook such a war, launching a surprise attack on the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet in Hawaii and an invasion of the American-controlled Philippines at virtually the same time.

The Americans were Japan's primary adversary in the Pacific War, but not their only one; within hours of Operation Z (as the IJN codenamed the Pearl Harbor operation), Japan also launched invasions of British Malaya and Hong Kong. A Japanese attack on the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia) followed a few days later.

The scale of Japanese operations, and Japanese territorial ambitions, in the Pacific War dwarfed the area disputed in Europe—yet they were undertaken by a country significantly smaller and resource-poorer, and only slightly more populous, than Germany. The comparative scale of the European Axis powers' territorial claims versus those of the Empire of Japan is not readily apparent from conventional maps of the war, since they took place in opposite hemispheres, but becomes dramatically evident if a bit of artistic license is applied, as the map below shows.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This map is not scientific, and contains a number of flaws necessitated by the time and tools used to make it, to wit:

- It is based on a Robinson projection, but the relocation of Europe to an equatorial latitude will have distorted its perspective somewhat. However, the two parts remain at the same scale, and the end result is close enough to reality to give an accurate impression of the relative sizes of the territories involved.
- Italy's possessions (and desired possessions) in North Africa are not shown, since National Socialist Germany's only interest in them was in support of its Axis ally; Germany's own territorial ambitions were concentrated in Europe. For the same reason, the Soviet Union east of the Urals is not included in the desired Axis territory.
- The source map used showed national borders as of 2006, not 1936, so features such as the post-*Anschluss* shape of the German Reich, the Soviet Union, and the 1936 borders of much of East and Southeast Asia (including Korea, northern China, Manchukuo, and Mongolia) are not accurately reflected. However, the landmasses are the same and the extent of territory controlled is based on best estimates from contemporary maps.
- The extent of Japan's intended control of the seas in the western Pacific is somewhat speculative, based as it is on the extent of naval operations during the Pacific War. Just how far the Japanese sphere of sea influence would have extended had the Western powers accepted Japan's conquests in Asia is not known, but would probably not have encompassed Australia, Hawaii, and the Aleutians.

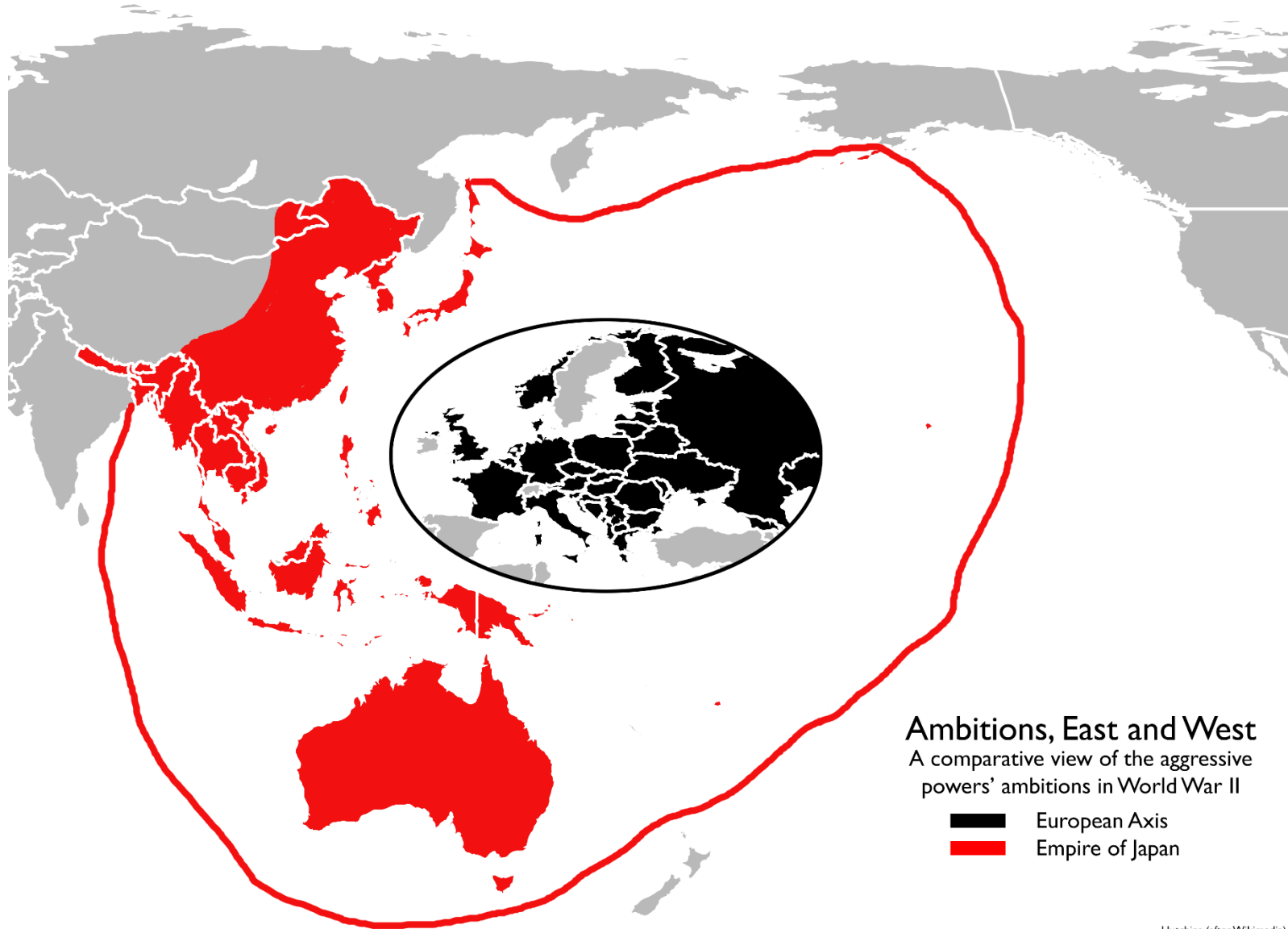


Figure 2 Japan's territorial ambitions dwarf those of Nazi Germany. Own work based on map from Wikimedia Commons.

Moreover, in pursuing these goals at this time, the Japanese were committing themselves to a war against not only beleaguered, far-off Britain and the defeated government-in-exile of the Netherlands, but also the as-yet-unscathed United States, with its enormous resources in manpower and materials. This was a conflict that even the architect of Japan's surprise attack, Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku,<sup>2</sup> recognized could not be won, and said as much to his masters in the government;<sup>3</sup> but they chose to proceed anyway. The lingering question is why—and, as is often the case with major historical questions, the reason it lingers is because it is not easily answered.

### **Where to Begin?**

The first problem faced by a historian seeking to examine the Empire of Japan's reasons for launching the Pacific War is deciding how far back one should start. In *The Rising Sun*, his colossal 1970 history of Japan's side of the war, American historian John Toland chose to begin with an attempted coup d'état by rebellious Japanese military officers on February 26, 1936—but then almost immediately backtracked, spurred by the need to explain the reasons why the February 26 Incident, as it became known, had happened. Similarly, one might choose the May 15 Incident of 1932, a similar failed coup attempt, only to face the same problem. Other candidate starting points include the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria, on the Asian mainland; the London (1930) and Washington (1922) Naval Treaties, which considerably shaped both Japanese attitudes

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<sup>2</sup> Except in quotations where they have been Westernized, Japanese names are given here in their original order, family name first.

<sup>3</sup> Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 192.

toward international arms limitation and the Imperial Japanese Navy itself; the limited-but-foreboding Japanese involvement in the First World War; even the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 and the Sino-Japanese War of 10 years before it.

Without very rigorous self-control, one can easily end up chasing any or all of these historical trails back to the 1854 "opening" of Japan, in which the country—for centuries in self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world—was compelled, more or less literally at the point of American naval guns, to become a participant in international relations and trade. To a Western observer, this is the most obvious starting point, because it marks Japan's almost-instantaneous transition from a self-contained, literally insular land of mystery to a modern nation-state—one (its American "patrons" hoped) understandable, and thereby controllable, by the political constructs of European-style international diplomacy. Today's historian can be forgiven for assuming that any attempt at understanding Japan's relations with the "modern world" should begin at the point where those relations themselves began.

The problem there is that, upon closer investigation, it becomes very tempting to seek reasons in the still *farther* past why those relations did not, in general, unfold as Japan's Western interlocutors hoped they would; and if one turns to a deep study of "pre-contact" Japanese culture in an attempt to construct a comprehensive background for the approach Japan's leaders took to being suddenly dragged into the nineteenth century, well... as the old lady is said to have told Bertrand Russell, it's turtles all the way down.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 1.

For present purposes, therefore, we will skim only very lightly over the deep background below, and reserve most of our consideration for the events of 1940 and 1941. While earlier historical events played major parts in creating the conditions in which they did it, it was in those years that the leaders of the Empire of Japan maneuvered their country into a war against an enemy some of their statesmen thought they didn't need to fight—and which their own chief military strategist warned them beforehand they could not defeat.

### **Deep Background: A Quick Summary**

One of the unanticipated side effects of Japan's 1854 "opening" was the country's late involvement in the territorial disputes that had been ongoing in the region north of what was then the Chinese Empire for some time.<sup>5</sup> This territory, which today comprises the Korean Peninsula, the northeast corner of the People's Republic of China, and the southeast corner of the Russian Federation, was known as Manchuria<sup>6</sup>, and at the time it was a largely unorganized territory disputed between Qing-dynasty China, the Russian Empire, and various local warlords. In 1894, just forty years after the American intervention and a mere four since adopting a parliamentary form of government, Japan stepped into this perceived power vacuum, declaring war on the Qing Empire in order to break the latter's influence over Korea. Victorious after less than eight months of fighting,

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<sup>5</sup> John Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936-1945* (New York: Random House, 1970): 7.

<sup>6</sup> The region is still commonly called Manchuria today, but not in a legal/political sense; compare Western regional place names like *Appalachia* or *Tyrolia*.





Figure 3 1937 Japanese map showing Korea, Liaodong to its west, and Manchuria.  
David Rumsey Map Collection

Japan extracted Korean independence from the Qing, and in the process seized the island of Formosa (modern-day Taiwan) and the Liaodong Peninsula (the latter described by Eri Hotta as "strategically located to access northeastern China"<sup>7</sup>), only to be forced to return the latter by diplomatic pressure from a consortium of European powers—one of which, Russia, went on to take Liaodong for itself, as well as meddling in the affairs of newly-independent Korea.

Within a few years, the Japanese—now the rising power in Asia—had formed an alliance with Britain, and under its auspices, built a modern, powerful navy along British lines. Adopting the latest in shipbuilding technology and methods of naval operations, the Imperial Japanese Navy proved its value in 1905, when Japan went to war with Russia. The war, fought over the perceived insult inherent in the Russians' taking of Liaodong and to reclaim the territory involved—was a major victory for Japan, and the stars of the

show were the modern warships of the IJN, who delivered an Asian power's first public drubbing of a European one at the Battle of Tsushima in May. The Japanese victory impressed Western public opinion, exacerbated an ongoing revolution in Russia,<sup>8</sup> and cemented Japan's place as the most eminent power in Asia.

In the years that followed, the Japanese took what they perceived as their rightful place among the world's great imperial powers, annexing Korea and eyeing Manchuria; but (due to lingering slights like the European interference in the outcome of the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War), they never felt fully accepted in that curious club. Japanese consciousness of Euro-American racism, and its part in preventing them from achieving that full membership in the pantheon of imperialist powers, was never far from the surface, and would be used—both sincerely and spuriously—to whip up support and to provide justification for Japan's imperial policy in the Far East.

To the rising class of Japanese nationalists, evidence of this racial bias, and the Western powers' consequent attempts to keep the Japanese Empire down, were not long in coming. The Washington and London Naval Treaties of 1922 and 1930, in which the world's major naval powers (including Japan) agreed to limit the sizes and types of warships in their fleets, were deeply unpopular among arch-nationalists in Japan—to the extent that Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi was shot by one for his support of the 1930 treaty's ratification.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Russian Revolution of 1905 is not as well known-today as the February and October Revolutions of 1917, and had many causes besides the Russo-Japanese War; however, Russia's resounding loss of the war reduced both the strength of the Tsar's armed forces and those forces' confidence in his government, making the customary response to revolutions in Tsarist Russia—to crush them with military action—less straightforward than usual.

<sup>9</sup> Hotta 2013: 101. Hamaguchi never recovered from his wounds and died the following year, having been hounded out of office by political enemies capitalizing on his literally weakened condition.

Hamaguchi was not the only politician to run afoul of the nationalist-militarist strain in 1930s Japanese politics, a situation not helped by the Japanese constitution's insistence on a military command structure with its own direct line to the Emperor, independent of the civilian government—a principle known as the independence of the supreme command. In theory, this was supposed to prevent soldiers from meddling with affairs of state; in practice, it made the civilian government subordinate to the military, as officers of the high command realized that all they had to do to prevent a given prime minister from taking office was refuse to nominate a war minister for his cabinet. As Hotta put it in *Japan 1941*, "This meant that Japan could have two governments with completely contradictory foreign policies."<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, public confidence in the institutions of civilian government—and in some quarters, confidence in the very concept of parliamentary democracy—had been damaged by the various coup attempts and numerous corruption scandals. Public sympathy was not entirely against the coup plotters, in large part because of the peculiar division of loyalty built into the constitution, whereby military personnel were separately accountable to the Emperor—who took no direct part in the day-to-day business of governance, but still held theoretically absolute power. Factions on both sides of the incidents thus claimed to be acting in the Emperor's name, and most of them—right or wrong—were acknowledged by the general public, and even some of their enemies, to be sincere in that belief.

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<sup>10</sup> Hotta 2013: 19.

Into the muddle thus created, by the system and the climate of the times, came two politicians who were to play key roles in setting up the situation at the outbreak of war—but who had both been pushed out of the government by the time it happened. One was Prince Konoe<sup>11</sup> Fumimaro, who had been prime minister in the late 1930s, and who returned to power in July 1940; and the other was his foreign minister, Matsuoka Yosuke.

### Setting the Stage

Prince Konoe, a descendant of a family that had effectively ruled Japan in ages past, had been prime minister when Japan's longstanding territorial conflict with China became an outright war in 1937.<sup>12</sup> Though he had resigned the following year, he agreed to return to office in 1940, shortly after the German successes against France and Britain in western Europe had revitalized the spirits of military adventurists in Japan.<sup>13</sup> He chose as his new cabinet's foreign minister Matsuoka Yosuke, a diplomat well-known for his undiplomatic manner. In 1937, when the US imposed economic sanctions on Japan in protest of its war with China, Matsuoka—then a member of the foreign service—spoke for many of his countrymen when he called out the hypocrisy inherent in American anti-imperialism: "Japan is expanding. And what country in its expansion era has ever

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<sup>11</sup> Sometimes romanized *Konoye* in older works, including Toland's.

<sup>12</sup> Toland 1970: 42.

<sup>13</sup> Toland 1970: 60.

failed to be trying to its neighbors? Ask the American Indian or the Mexican how excruciatingly trying the young United States used to be once upon a time."<sup>14</sup>

To the man who made those remarks, three years after he made them, would fall the responsibility of managing his country's increasingly tense relations with the United States.

### **The Key Ingredients**

The principal reason for this expansionist spirit in Japan, beyond simple acquisitiveness of territory for its own sake, lay in the natural resources with which the islands were—and more importantly were not—endowed, and the ever-increasing demands placed thereon by the country's exploding population. Counting only the four principal (or "home") islands, Japan has an area of only 377,971 square kilometers. By comparison, the state of California alone encompasses 423,967 km<sup>2</sup>. However, California's population in 1935 was 6,175,000;<sup>15</sup> Japan held more than *ten times* that number of citizens, with a population of 69,254,000<sup>16</sup>—more even than Germany at the same time, which counted 66,616,000 citizens before the 1936 *Anschluss* with Austria.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Toland 1970, 48.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Intercensal Estimates of the Total Resident Population of States: 1930 to 1939" (1996).

<sup>16</sup> Japan Statistics Bureau, *Statistical Handbook of Japan 2016* (Tokyo: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> OKH Abteilung Inland, "Das Großdeutsche Reich" (map), *Soldaten Atlas* (Berlin: Oberkommando des Heeres).

Besides the small size of the country relative to its growing population, Japan had another problem that would be familiar to the Germans of the time: a scarcity of natural resources, and specifically those resources most necessary to the operation of a major industrial power, which the Japanese were determined to be. Although well-endowed with coal and timber, Japan was reaching its limit in terms of agricultural production versus its still-growing population, and—more importantly for the militarists in government—it was poor in the two things a first-rate military power of the mid-twentieth century needed most: iron ore and petroleum. And like the Germans, they had decided that if those resources couldn't be had on home soil or bought on the open market, they

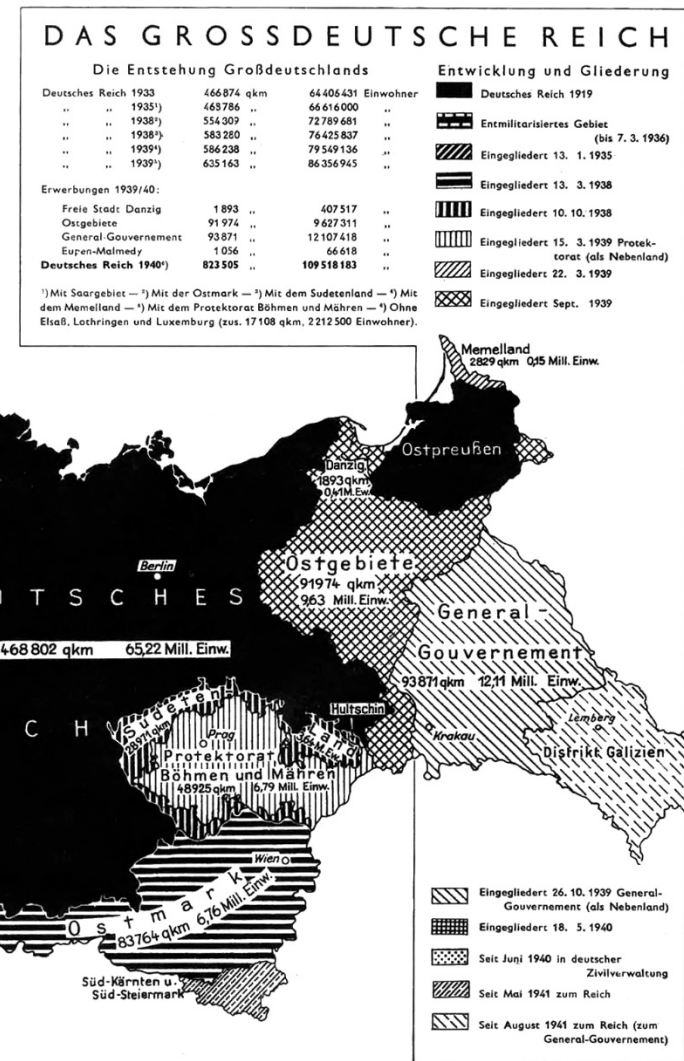


Figure 4 Das Großdeutsche Reich, map from a 1941 German military handbook, with area and population figures. *OKH Soldaten Atlas*





The map above, taken from a 1936 issue of *Fortune* magazine entirely devoted to Japan, shows that the country's resource situation was known in the West as well as at home. In that same year, an article appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald* indicating that Japan's population and agricultural problems were matters of discussion even at public lectures held for rural Australian men's associations.<sup>18</sup> It cannot, therefore, be said that the West was unaware of Japan's motivation in seeking an empire. American political cartoons of the era reflect a growing awareness that Japan was on the move in Asia as early as 1921, although how much of a threat Japanese expansion posed to US interests was a matter of some dispute. Some cartoonists, particularly for the Hearst papers, sounded strident warnings about the Japanese menace, while others portrayed the whole business as a domestic swindle to justify increased military spending.



Carey Orr. *The Tribune* (Chicago), c. 1921.



Homer Stinson. *Dayton Daily News*, c. 1922.

Figure 6 Contrasting political cartoons. A *Cartoon History of American Foreign Policy*

<sup>18</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, "Japan's Population, Problem of the Future" (Sydney: December 9, 1936): 18.



Moreover, until mid-1941, much of Japan's supply of oil came from the United States—a circumstance of which Japanese planners were uncomfortably aware. The IJN, for which oil was vital to the most basic operations both at sea and in the air, kept meticulous track of its reserves and projected that it would be able to operate at full strength against the US Navy for no more than a year, with complete collapse inevitable within three.<sup>19</sup> At the September 19, 1940 Liaison Conference,<sup>20</sup> in which Japan's imminent alliance with Germany and Italy was discussed, Prime Minister Konoe acknowledged the problem with his customary understatement: "At the present time our country depends to a large extent on Britain and the United States for her principal war materials. Accordingly, we cannot help but experience considerable difficulties."<sup>21</sup>

The records of the conferences throughout 1941 are studded with various ministers and military officials musing about, and asking about, the oil situation, but as the year progressed they seem to have convinced themselves that the problem could be managed. For example, at the November 5 Imperial Conference, Planning Board Director Suzuki Teiichi reported a set of calculations blithely including expected quantities to be seized from Borneo, Sumatra, and the Dutch East Indies—none of which Japanese forces had even attacked at that point, much less captured with all their oil production facilities intact. (As Evans and Peattie point out, Japanese planners' oil figures also failed to take into account any logistical difficulties or losses

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<sup>19</sup> David C. Evans, Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997): 409.

<sup>20</sup> The Liaison Conference, a meeting between key government ministers and top military brass, was the principal mechanism by which the Japanese government made policy decisions at the time—in effect, an effort to reconcile the "two governments" problem described by Hotta earlier. When significant policy decisions had been reached, they would then be taken to an Imperial Conference, which was essentially a Liaison Conference held in the presence of the Emperor, to receive royal approval.

<sup>21</sup> Nobutaka Ike, ed.: *Japan's Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967): 5.

incurred in transporting this far-flung captured oil back to Japan for use. These would certainly have been significant, given an overall shortage of tanker capacity in the Japanese merchant marine and the prospect of unrestricted submarine warfare being conducted by the American, British, and Dutch navies.<sup>22)</sup>

### **North or South?**

The great debate at the policy conferences of 1941 was not so much whether Japan should enter the escalating worldwide hostilities. Germany's successes in Europe (and later what looked, in the summer of 1941, like its imminent victory over the USSR), along with Japanese policymakers' acute knowledge of their country's resource situation, led to a situation in which those policymakers seemed resigned to, if not eager for, war with *somebody*; the overriding question thus became, with whom? Two options, dubbed the north and south options, existed. The north option called for Japan's armed forces, principally the Imperial Army, to attack the Soviet Union. Given Japan's historical difficulties with Russia in Manchuria and Korea, and a rising anti-Communist sentiment in the country, this was an attractive option to many in government—including Foreign Minister Matsuoka, who was unusually bellicose for a non-military man and his country's chief diplomat. At the Liaison Conference of June 25, 1941—three days after Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, its invasion of the Soviet Union—he declared, "When Germany wins and disposes of the Soviet Union, we can't take the fruits of victory without having done something. We have to either shed blood or engage in diplomacy. It's best to shed blood."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Evans-Peattie 1997, 409.

<sup>23</sup> Nobutaka 1967, 60.

(Matsuoka's belligerence and verbosity were occasional sources of bemusement to his colleagues; the record of the May 22, 1941 conference includes a point at which Navy Minister Oikawa Koshiro asked, evidently rhetorically, "Is Matsuoka sane?"<sup>24</sup>—a question to which no one else in the room appears to have had a ready answer.)

The south option, on the other hand, involved striking out for the resources of Southeast Asia and the western Pacific, principally by wresting control of various European colonies in the area from their masters—e.g., the Philippines (American), British Malaya, French Indochina, and the Dutch East Indies. This option, which would rely much more heavily on the Imperial Navy, could nevertheless be spun as a continuation (toward ultimate resolution) of the war with China, referred to in Japanese documents as the China Incident; it also appealed to the widespread sentiment toward "Pan-Asianism," which portrayed an ideal where all of Asia's people were freed from the yoke of Western imperialism.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, it would almost certainly lead to war with the present owners of those colonies, with the possible exception of the French.

### **"The Turning Point"**

In the end, the "southern option" basically chose itself. After debating the point at length in the wake of Barbarossa, Konoe's government decided not to decide outright, but to proceed with southern operations in stages. As a signatory to the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, Japan could use the former's influence with the collaborationist French government in

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<sup>24</sup> Nobutaka 1967, 39.

<sup>25</sup> That Japan aimed to do this by replacing it with the yoke of Japanese imperialism seems not to have been an issue.

Vichy to "request" access to French Indochina, with the understanding that it would be taken by force if not granted. Vichy bowed to this demand on July 23, 1941, allowing Japanese troops to occupy the colony. Since this was done by (at least ostensibly) diplomatic means, the Japanese did not expect it to cause an escalation in the international situation, but cause one it did; within days, the US government had frozen all of Japan's assets in the country and imposed a full embargo on exports to Japan—including petroleum. In a recent lecture on the road to the Pacific War, Japanese historian Moriyama Atsushi described this embargo as "the turning point that heavily pushed Japan toward war with the United States."<sup>26</sup>

A few days before, Foreign Minister Matsuoka had been maneuvered out of Konoe's cabinet, largely at the insistence of War Minister Tojo Hideki, on the basis that his bellicose personality and his personal dislike of US Secretary of State Cordell Hull had led him to sabotage the ongoing diplomatic negotiations with the American government.<sup>27</sup> Now, ironically, those negotiations became more critical than ever—and more difficult, given the hard line both Hull and President Franklin D. Roosevelt were now taking over the Indochina affair. Konoe and his new, pro-American foreign minister, Admiral Toyoda Tejiro, struggled on for another two months, attempting to arrange a face-to-face meeting between Konoe and Roosevelt in the hope that the two leaders could cut through the tangle of diplomacy man-to-man. The summit had limited support at home and virtually none in the United States, though Roosevelt himself seemed amenable, and ultimately nothing came of it.

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<sup>26</sup> Moriyama Atsushi, "Lecture 13: From the US-Japan Negotiations to the Outbreak of War." *Fifteen Lectures on Showa Japan: Road to the Pacific War in Recent Historiography*, Tsutsui Kiyotada, ed. (Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2016): 243.

<sup>27</sup> Toland 1970, 85. Toland takes the line that it was not so much Matsuoka's actions themselves that exercised Tojo, so much as the fact that he had undertaken them against Konoe's direct instructions.

In the meantime, at an Imperial Conference on September 6, the military had successfully insisted that a deadline of October 10 be set on the negotiations, after which, if the United States had not ceased insisting that the Japanese leave Indochina and reopened trade, Japan would go to war—but when that deadline passed without diplomatic success, the Army and Navy high command hesitated, saying their forces were not yet ready to begin the war. In order to justify abandoning the September 6 resolution, the government which made it would have to be replaced. Worn down and defeated by the momentum of events, Konoe resigned on October 16. Tojo replaced him as prime minister—without giving up his seat as war minister.<sup>28</sup>

In one of the compact ironies with which the history of human folly is replete, the USA's oil embargo—intended to reduce Japan's willingness to make war—had the opposite effect. With the American tap turned off, and negotiations to turn it on again going nowhere, Japan's policymakers concluded that another source would have to be found. This had the effect of deciding the north-vs.-south question: the only oil reserves to be acquired by the move north were in northern Sakhalin Island, and they were deemed insufficient for the country's needs. Therefore, Japan would have to move south, to seize the richer oil fields of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.

This would necessitate war with the United States; that had been decided as early as the September 6 conference, one of the briefing documents for which read in part, "Under these circumstances [the so-called "New Order" planned for East

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<sup>28</sup> Hotta 2013, 212-214.

Asia], it must be pointed out that the policies of Japan and the United States are mutually incompatible; it is historically inevitable that the conflict between the two countries... will ultimately lead to war."<sup>29</sup> This perceived inevitability meant that the second part of the question—when to strike—also answered itself. With the country's oil reserves inevitably dwindling even in peacetime, the Japanese military would only have the strength to even *hope* for victory if the war began without delay. At the November 1 Liaison Conference, Navy Chief of Staff Nagano Osami summarized the situation in response to a question from Finance Minister Kaya Okinori: "We might avoid war now, but go to war three years later; or we might go to war now and plan for what the situation will be three years hence. I think it would be easier to engage in a war now. The reason is that now we have the necessary foundation for it... The time for war will not come later!"<sup>30</sup>

Nagano's view carried the day; at the end of the November 1 conference, the government set a hard deadline of November 30 for one final effort to resolve the situation diplomatically. After that point, the official policy would be that war with the United States was inevitable, and that it must be commenced without further delay.

Four days later, at the Imperial Conference convened to present these conclusions to the Emperor, President of the Privy Council Hara Yoshimichi reiterated both points for His Majesty's benefit, saying, "Negotiations with the United States have failed to lead to an agreement. A war against the United States and Great Britain is inevitable if Japan is to survive... We have some uneasiness about a protracted war. But how can we let the United States continue to do as she pleases, even though

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<sup>29</sup> Nobutaka 1967, 152.

<sup>30</sup> Nobutaka 1967, 201.

there is some uneasiness? Two years from now [without taking the oil fields to the south] we will have no petroleum for military use. Ships will stop moving... I fear that we would become a third-class nation in two or three years if we just sat tight."<sup>31</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the commencement of hostilities was set for December 8 and operational planning begun in earnest. In the event, the IJN's leadership was willing to call off Operation Z if there had been a diplomatic breakthrough even after the strike force put to sea; but no such breakthrough came, and the war began on schedule. Less than four years later, it ended with Japan's complete and utter defeat, fulfilling Hara's prediction.

### **Why Did It Come to This?**

We have seen *how* the Empire of Japan's leaders managed to maneuver it into an unwinnable war with the United States—often in the belief that they were doing just the opposite. The facts of the matter, as set down in the Japanese government's own records of its policy conferences, are convoluted, but certain. Much more elusive is the question of *why*? Why did the leaders of a vigorous, forward-looking country with a clear national agenda end up in a situation where, though they knew they couldn't win such a war, they believed they had to try?

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<sup>31</sup> Nobutaka 1967, 237-238.

In some respects, this is a question that cannot be answered for certain; to do so would require the answerer to read the minds of others, and others who are long dead, into the bargain. We can, however, make some educated guesses, based on the historical record and inferences drawn from human nature. The words of the officials in the policy conference records reveal a potent mix of ego, insecurity, unwillingness to admit uncertainty, and (increasingly, as 1941 goes on) willful self-deception bordering on delusion. In some cases, simple pigheadedness cannot be discounted—as, for instance, when Tojo expressed private reservations about the feasibility of the September 6 decision, then ferociously denounced Konoe for uttering similar reservations in public, insisting that the decision must be abided by, in Eri Hotta's words, "simply because it had been decided."<sup>32</sup>

Coupled to all that was a powerful Japanese cultural force that contemporary American observers tended to be mystified by (as, indeed, were many American servicemen during the ensuing war): the conviction that even the physical reality of the situation must defer to the strength of Japan's national will. Army Vice Chief of Staff Tsukada Ko summarized this view in his remarks at the November 1 conference, where the final deadline for war was set:

"I, Tsukada, believe that war cannot be avoided. Now is the time. Even if we don't go to war now, we must do so next year, or the year after that. Now is the time. The moral spirit of Japan, the Land of the Gods, will shine on this occasion...

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<sup>32</sup> Hotta 2013, 204.



we will build an iron wall; and within it we will destroy, one by one, the enemy states in Asia; and in addition, we will defeat America and Britain."<sup>33</sup>

This concept of *moral spirit*—the conviction that Japan was right, and that the power in the right could not lose regardless of how hopeless the mere *facts* of the matter might suggest—was not the only reason for the final decision to go to war. As John Toland glumly concluded in *The Rising Sun*, the reasons were many, and not exclusively Japanese:

A war that need not have been fought was about to be fought because of mutual misunderstanding, language difficulties, and mistranslations as well as Japanese opportunism, *gekokujo*,<sup>34</sup> irrationality, honor, pride and fear—and American racial prejudice, distrust, ignorance of the Orient, rigidity, self-righteousness, honor, national pride and fear.<sup>35</sup>

However, it seems evident from the record that, ultimately, the sentiments expressed by Tsukada played a critical role in the complicated chain of events, decisions, and reactions that ultimately led to the war. This belief in the power of the national will provided the final psychological escape hatch required for otherwise rational, well-informed men to put aside rationality and choose to take what they knew to be an almost hopeless gamble. In today's "post-factual" climate, there may be a lesson here; whether anyone chooses to receive it is another question entirely.

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<sup>33</sup> Nobutaka 1967, 207.

<sup>34</sup> Literally "insubordination", *gekokujo* was a Japanese principle going back to feudal times, describing disobedience for a perceived higher cause.

<sup>35</sup> Toland 1970, 147.

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