Japan's Total War or Total Incompetence
Asia-Pacific War of 1937-1945

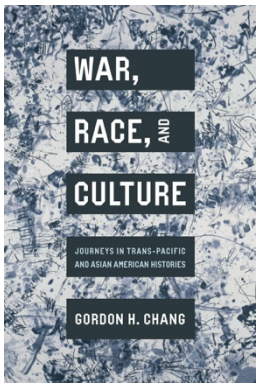
After four years of brutal, unresolved war in China (1937-1941), Japan was diplomatically isolated yet depended on the USA for 85% of its oil. While continuing to sell Japan oil and some food, the U.S. was also demanding that Japan stop its war in China. Then, in Summer of 1941 (after Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union), the U.S. stopped selling Japan any more oil and demanded an immediate ceasefire in China. In November 1941, Japan was low on oil, and the U.S. increased its pressure by beginning full economic sanctions. Rather than negotiate, the Japanese high command (a very small, elitist group of men) made the fateful decision to expand the war by attacking the USA and the Western allies instead. This decision had no long-term exit strategy or hope of success. It was driven by a narrow psychology that Japan could win simply because Japan was morally, spiritually, and racially superior to everyone else.

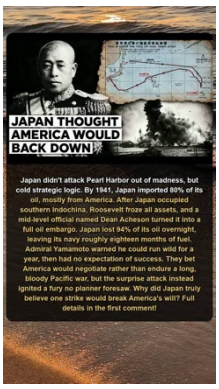


Between 1937 and 1945, approximately 25-30 million people died as a result of the Asia-Pacific War. About 70% of those 25-30 million people were civilians. The Dutch East Indies colony of Indonesia alone lost 4 million civilians, or about 5.5% of its total population, nearly all of whom died from starvation or disease.

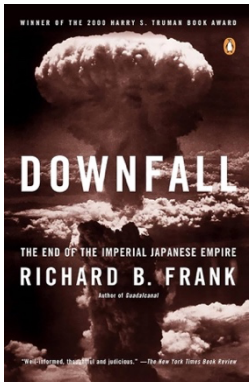
Of the apx. 2.2 million Japanese soldiers who died during the Asia-Pacific War, about 60% died from starvation or disease, whereas just 40% died from direct combat. Of the apx. 18-20 million civilians who died during the war, just 3% were Japanese civilians. By comparison, the number of both military and civilian deaths for Germany during WWII was about 2.5x higher than for Japan, and a combination of direct combat, battlefield conditions, and enemy capture accounted for apx. 85% of Germany's military deaths. Compared to Germany, Japan's high percentage of military losses due to non-combat conditions is evidence that Japan conducted a military campaign that was poorly managed from the outset, a campaign plagued by arrogance, protection of personal status, and gross incompetence.











Japan's Wartime Incompetence

Japan's military and administrative performance during World War II suffered from severe strategic, organizational, and logistical failures. Rather than a single mistake, Japan's defeat was driven by several core systemic weaknesses:

1. Toxic Army–Navy Rivalry

- **Separate Realities:** The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) functioned almost like hostile, independent nations. They maintained separate intelligence networks, refused to share vital radio codes or tactical data, and developed competing equipment and aircraft lines.
- **Concealing Disasters:** When the Navy lost four aircraft carriers at the Battle of Midway (June 1942), high-ranking naval officers hid the disaster from Army leadership for weeks, leading to disasters for the Army.
- **Refusing Escorts:** The Navy feared losing its own surface warships, so it delayed organizing a safe convoy system for merchant ships. In fact, unlike modern naval operations in countries such as the USA and UK, the Japanese Army had to build and maintain its own fleet of ships, to transport men and supplies around the empire because the Navy often refused to do the job.

Example 1: The Navy is only for the Navy

- **Separate Fleet**: Rather than relying exclusively on the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) operated its own fleet of transport ships, landing craft, and even specialized aircraft-carrying landing ships. The Navy and Army refused to share resources, and cooperating with the Army could sometimes hurt a naval officer's own career and status within the Navy – your purpose as an IJN officer was to make higher-ranking IJN officers happy, not worry about the Army.
- **Landing Craft & Carriers**: The Army developed and operated *Daihatsu*-class landing barges to move troops and equipment ashore. It also built and used specialized vessels like the *Akitsu Maru* and *Nigitsu Maru*, which functioned as aircraft ferries and amphibious landing craft carriers.
- **Submarine Transports**: As losses increased later in the war and island garrisons across the Pacific were cut off, the Army designed and built its own transport submarines (*Yu-tei*), to sneak supplies to isolated soldiers. The IJN often refused to carry out such operations, wanting to take no responsibility for the problems of the IJA.

Example 2: Our Weapons are Our Weapons

The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) developed separate aircraft primarily due to institutional rivalry, divergent strategic missions, and separate industrial and foreign-support networks.

Different Foreign Mentors and Technology

- **The Navy and Britain:** The IJN heavily modeled its aviation on the British Royal Navy. Most famously, British engineers arrived from the UK in 1921, training Japanese naval aviators in carrier operations, torpedo bombing, and naval supplying.
- **The Army and France:** The IJA looked to the European continent, inviting French military aviation missions and acquiring French and other European land-based aircraft doctrines.

Divergent Tactical Needs & Doctrines

- **Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN):** Fought across the vast Pacific Ocean, operating from aircraft carriers or island bases. IJN prioritized long-range, heavy payload capacity, powerful cannons (to tear apart heavy bombers and ships), and capabilities like folding wings and floatplanes.
- **Imperial Japanese Army (IJA):** Operated primarily over continental landmasses (China, Manchuria, and Southeast Asia). IJA prioritized high rates of fire for fighting enemy planes, close air support for ground troops, and rugged yet lightweight construction of airframes.

Corruption and Industrial Alliances (*Zaibatsu*)

- **Separate Suppliers:** The rivalry between the IJA and IJN extended to Japan's industrial conglomerates (*zaibatsu*).
    - **Mitsubishi** and **Nakajima** -- though Nakajima also supplied the Army, both Mitsubishi and Nakajima had deep political and economic ties with the Navy.
    - **Kawasaki** and others – though they also supplied the Navy, they were closely aligned with the Army.
- **No Standardization:** For many years before World War Two, the IJA and the IJN were so worried that the other service would gain advantages that they refused to share technical knowledge or standardize military equipment during that time. By the time of the Asia-Pacific War, the IJA and IJN used completely different electrical systems, non-interchangeable machine guns, different calibers of machine guns and artillery, and different supply chains even for basic parts. Having no standard system caused a massive logistical nightmare for Japanese manufacturers of military goods. Japanese weapons, even the same types of weapon, sometimes fired different types of ammunition.



- **Intentional Design Separation:** For example, a 7.7 mm rifle was common for IJA soldiers and IJN marines. But the IJA and IJN intentionally engineered differently sized and shaped cartridges and casings (see 7.7mm rounds in picture) so that the IJN wouldn't be able to use the IJA's ammunition supplies and vice versa. This was partly done to maintain specific military-industrial contracts (bureaucratic corruption) but also to make sure that the IJA and IJN could remain distinct from each other ("our type is special").

2. Disregard for Logistics and Supply

- **Neglected Transport:** The Army's (IJA's) transport and logistics branch was viewed with contempt, often staffed by the lowest-ranking academy graduates or marginalized groups, resulting in a lack of organized supply chains. During most of the Pacific War, Japan had a very low combat-to-support supply chain of 1:1.3 – which means that for every one combat person there were just 1.3 people providing logistical support. By comparison, the U.S. ratio was about 1:4.3 – which means that for every one combat person there were 4.3 people providing logistical support (i.e., apx. 81% of military staff was involved in supplying the 19% that were actually in combat).
- **Starvation over Combat:** Japanese Army forces regularly advanced faster than their supply lines could support. In campaigns like the invasion of India or island bases like Guadalcanal and New Guinea, far more Japanese soldiers died from starvation, malaria, and disease than from direct combat.
- **Eating Pack Animals:** During pushes into jungle or forest areas, soldiers relied on pack animals to move heavy weapons. When these animals were eaten for protein, exhausted soldiers had to physically haul artillery pieces through deep mud and other difficult terrain.



3. Complete Miscalculation of Industrial Power

- **Underestimating the U.S.A.:** Japan initiated a war against the United States despite a staggering industrial mismatch. Admiral Yamamoto, Japan's most talented naval commander, who had studied naval strategy in the United States, famously warned that Japan could easily win victories during the first six-to-twelve months of a war with the U.S., but it had no hope if the war dragged into a prolonged military-industrial conflict.
- **Resource Blindness:** Japan's naval shipbuilding budget for an entire decade was less than what the U.S. Navy spent in just one year (1940). Japan built unarmored, short-range "silver bullet" (high-performance, low-defense) aircraft and lacked the capacity to replace lost ships, planes, or pilots at a sustainable rate.

4. Flawed Doctrine and Human Capital

- **Rigid Honor Culture:** The military mindset viewed surrender as the ultimate disgrace. This (1) prevented tactical retreats that could have saved Japanese troops. It (2) encouraged suicidal "*banzai*" charges against machine guns and artillery. And it (3) alienated local populations in occupied territories through extreme brutality – these local people could have helped Japan win its war, but instead Japan created millions of enemy civilians throughout Asia.
- **Failure to Rotate Veterans:** Unlike the Americans, who rotated experienced pilots and specialists back home to train new recruits, Japan kept its elite aviators and elite marines fighting at the frontlines until they were all killed, causing an irreversible collapse in pilot quality and infantry skills by 1943.

Arrogance

During the Asia-Pacific War, Japanese arrogance and a sense of cultural superiority – fueled by militarism, imperial ambition, and a twisted interpretation of the samurai code of *bushido* – shaped both strategic blunders and severe wartime atrocities.

1. Roots of Wartime Arrogance



- **Master Race Ideology:** Japanese leadership and military forces increasingly viewed themselves as a "master race" destined to liberate and rule over Asia, brutally alienating local populations who had initially welcomed them. This divine, racist superiority had been built into Japan's new imperial system, so officers from the IJN and especially the IJA had been programmed with a kind of sadistic, male chauvinistic, racial superiority, which had been normalized in them since childhood.
- **Great Power Narcissism:** Imperial Japan's early military successes (such as the China-Japan War of 1894-95 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05) fostered an inflated sense of invincibility and deep-seated pride that blinded leaders from rational decisions and practicality.
- **Disregard for Industrial Realities:** Confident in their own moral and strategic superiority, Japan's high command (small, elitist group) badly underestimated the vast industrial, economic, and military capacity of the United States and Allied powers.

2. Strategic Blunders and Fanaticism

- **Pearl Harbor and Overreach:** Attacking Pearl Harbor without a plan to knock the U.S. out of the industrial war was a reckless gamble. It came from the belief that America's materialist culture lacked spiritual grit. The Americans were morally corrupt and mentally weak, so they lacked any real ability to fight a superior culture like Japan.
- **Refusal to Surrender:** Even after defeat was imminent – such as the fall of Saipan island in 1944 – national pride and a rigid code that viewed surrender as the ultimate shame prevented Japanese leaders from taking rational steps to end the war.
- **Fanatical Counterattacks:** Soldiers **and civilians** were ordered to make desperate *banzai* charges or commit suicide rather than face capture. This came from Japan's massive wartime propaganda. Both soldiers and citizens, raised from birth to fear anyone and anything that wasn't Japanese, had essentially been encoded (brainwashed) into believing the worst possible myths and stereotypes about Americans; they were horrible monsters who did things like eat human babies.

3. Brutality and Legacy

- **Atrocities and Impunity:** This sense of superiority manifested in widespread brutality against prisoners of war and against civilians, including sadistic torture and beheadings. It also drove war crimes in the Chinese cities of Shanghai and Nanjing, as well as in numerous forced labor camps throughout China and other parts of Asia. In Nanjing alone, the IJA mass exterminated 150 to 300 thousand civilians and individually raped, gang raped, and/or mutilated between 30 to 70 thousand women and girls.

Was It an Unrealistic Plan, No Plan, or Mere Cultish Fantasy?

Imperial Japan entered and sustained the Asia-Pacific War (1937-1945) without a realistic political or diplomatic exit strategy, relying instead on a military doctrine of decisive battle and fighting to the death rather than making a plan to end the conflict on favorable terms.

Root Causes of the Strategy

- **Rejecting Unconditional Surrender:** Japanese political and military leaders viewed Allied demands for unconditional surrender as an existential threat to the *kokutai* (the imperial system and national polity) and considered surrender dishonorable. More simply, the IJA especially wanted to keep its power and wealth after the war at all costs, sacrificing the entire Japanese civilian population if necessary.
- **The "Ketsu-Go" (Decisive Battle) Concept:** Rather than seeking a diplomatic possibility for peace, military leaders in 1945 pinned their hopes on inflicting catastrophic casualties during an Allied invasion of the Japanese home islands (Operation Downfall). The plan was to force the U.S. into a negotiated peace that would allow Japan to retain parts of its empire. According to extensive research of Japanese archives, historian Richard Frank uncovered the terribly dark truth about the IJA and its plan to continue Japan's war indefinitely, including the IJA's willingness to **sacrifice the entire Japanese civilian population** in order to save itself. The IJA's armageddon strategy (i.e., dark fantasy) is considered on par with cult thinking and should be treated as an example of absolute corruption and lack of concern for human suffering, even Japanese suffering.



- **Delusion and Censorship:** The Japanese public and many lower-to-mid-tier officers were shielded from the grim reality of the industrial-military attrition of the Asia-Pacific War. Because the Japanese propaganda machine was effective, many people in Japan had no real understanding of the war, hearing only about victories and noble sacrifices. Even today, popular Japanese films about the war focus on individual soldier stories and noble sacrifices.
- **Failed Soviet Mediation:** Instead of a direct diplomatic exit, Tokyo desperately and naively hoped that the Soviet Union — which was actively preparing to invade Manchuria — would somehow act as a neutral mediator to help with a conditional peace between Japan, the U.S., and China.

How the War Finally Ended

Japan's lack of an exit strategy and the IJA's cultish fantasy about fighting to the last man meant that ending the Asia-Pacific War required external and structural shocks:

(1) The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
(2) The Soviet invasion of Manchuria, which destroyed Japan's last major field armies in the north of China.
(3) Personal intervention by Emperor Hirohito (Showa), who intervened to order the military to accept the Potsdam Declaration and unconditional surrender.

Historical Memory: Historical Negationism – the Elitist Denial of Reality

Postwar denial (negation of historical reality) is typically led by Japanese nationalist (right-wing) elites, who minimize or evade critical analysis of wartime aggression. This negationism helps drive today's anti-foreign sentiment that has become more important in the recent rise of popular nationalism (a kind of Trump-ism in Japan). The public and political denial of Japan's real history still contributes to ongoing diplomatic tensions between Japan and its Asian neighbors. Unfortunately, the Japanese left-wing is almost powerless to correct this problem, since the Japanese left is politically powerless, and the far-left is still dominated by Marxist ideology, which practices its own form of denying reality.

Both the Japanese far-left and the entire Japanese right have almost always interpreted history as a tool for contemporary politics, not as an accurate record for truthful analysis. This pattern has a long history in Japan. As a result, the history of the Asia-Pacific War, including most of what occurred before the war and what occurred after, has relied heavily on the evidence, data, and analysis of historians outside of Japan, including those from China, South Korea, the U.K. an its former colonies like Singapore, and the U.S.

Accuracy in Japan

In Japan, the Asia-Pacific War is treated almost like a secret, kept hidden from the Japanese public typically through the rigid control of history education in schools. This type of negationism is supported by nationalist, anti-foreign campaigns on the Internet designed to crush all discussions about facts and reality. For any kind of accurate or detailed understanding in Japan, one must read academic, centrist Japanese historians (who are always fighting to tell the truth) or follow the news stories about Japanese rights groups.

Truth from the Bottom – Understanding Reality through Social History

English-language newspapers in Japan and their Japanese-language affiliates today often run stories about rights groups in Japan and their battles with society and the Japanese government. One such case concerns Japanese war orphans. After 1945, there were officially 123,511 (unofficially maybe 180,000) children who had been orphaned (or intentionally abandoned by their relatives) due to the Asia-Pacific War. Many of these children – classified as vagrants, not orphans – were arrested, assigned to work groups, or eluded the police to live as drug dealers, street criminals, or child prostitutes. Extended family members and most of the Japanese public refused to aid or adopt many of these children. The Japanese government ignored the situation of these orphans because their existence damaged the postwar image that Japan was one big family in which everyone helped each other recover from the "unfortunate events" of the war. The result was that the government refused to provide any type of assistance or compensation to these orphans until an orphan-rights group won a district-court ruling. But that did not happen until year 2006, after most of these children had already lived their lives and died. During this same period, between 1946 and 2006, the government provided the yen-equivalent of nearly $500 billion in compensation to families of WWII veterans (some of them war criminals), including money to their grandchildren. Over this same period, war orphans received $0 in government assistance, even if their parents had been killed while fighting for Japan.





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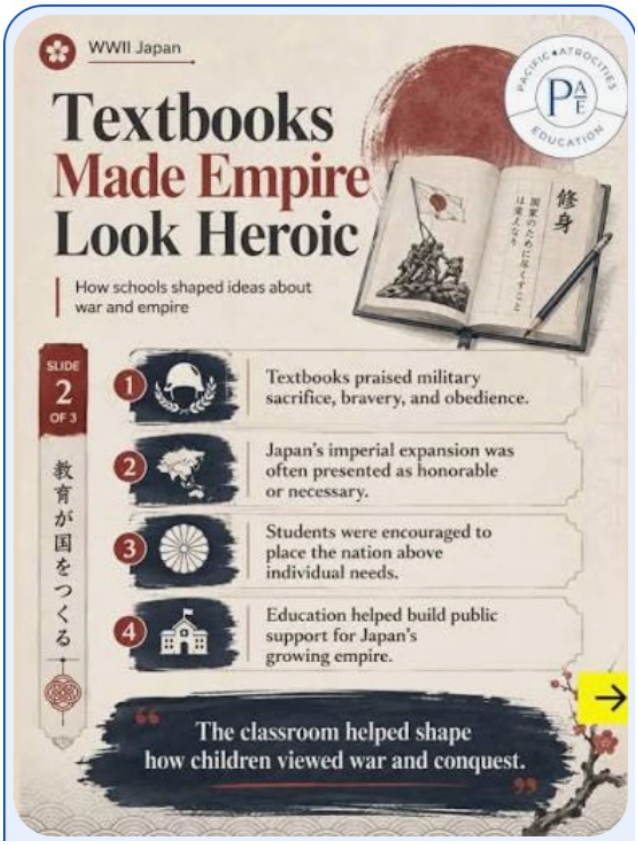
Top left image: A wartime postcard (1940s) showing a Japanese soldier freeing the children of Asia from oppression. He has no face so that a family member could imagine their own son's face as the liberator. https://www.myanmarphotoarchive.org/wartime-japanese-postcards/



Right image: Not much has changed since 1945. Public school textbooks still shape the way Japanese people see the Asia-Pacific War today. The war was somehow necessary or somehow an "unfortunate accident," in which Japan was the victim, not the aggressor.



Bottom left image: The 1988 animated film *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no Haka*, 火垂るの墓) tells the story of two Japanese orphans in Kobe who fight to survive the war. It was adapted from Akiyuki Nosaka's 1967 semi-autobiographical short story, drawing on real wartime hardships and the loss of his younger sister to malnutrition. It's also an exposé on the cruelty of Japanese wartime society itself. It serves as one of the best anti-war films in Japan. Unfortunately, the Japanese nationalist-right has also co-opted the film's message, to sell its own propaganda that all of Japan, including the Japanese military, was just one big victim of the Asia-Pacific War.