

World War II: The Pacific Theatre of War

Origins of American Rule on Hawaii

Even if it was only admitted full statehood as the 50th state in 1959, Hawaii had long been under American influence. Although the islands had been re-discovered by the English explorer James Cook* in 1778 and the British had been the first to send settlers, it were the three successive waves of preachers dispatched by US foreign mission agency since 1820 that established American predominance on the archipelago. As the Hawaiian rulers quickly converted to Christianity, it was only logical that the bringers of this new faith became close advisors to their court. However, the missionaries advised the traditional rulers not only on religious but also on political and economic questions. A notable example is the introduction of the concept of land ownership, yet unknown to the traditional Hawaiian society. Up to the 1840s, the chiefs had rather made all their people share the work and the harvest of the land. But this system, called ahupua'a*, was both foreign and unfavourable to the westerners. Having seen the natives grow sugar cane, the American settlers rather wanted to introduce their plantation system for a profitable production of this work intensive crop. Consequently, US advisors pressed King Kamehameha III* to reorganise landownership, allowing foreigners to acquire large parts of the islands since 1848. From then on, American business came to rule Hawaii as most of the poor and illiterate natives had no chance to compete with US investments. Moreover, the growing influx of plantation workers from countries as various as the USA, Puerto Rico, China and Japan also helped spread diseases like smallpox and measles more quickly. Lacking resistance, it is estimated that up to a quarter of the native population died of these new diseases. The ensuing shift of power from the natives to the immigrants was fostered politically by a new constitution in 1887. Under the guise of democratisation, King Kalakaua* was forced to hand over much of his powers to a legislative body. This body, however, was restricted to white or Hawaiian males with a regular income. Although property qualifications were common among many western states like Great Britain and Germany at that time, it is remarkable that the American advisors – whose own constitution did not include such a restriction – took up this policy. In fact, they even raised the financial requirements to at least six hundred dollars a year. This way, the Americans made sure that only white plantation owners could qualify. Though Kalakaua's successor, Empress Liliuokalani, attempted to redress the balance by changing the constitution, she was deposed before she could execute her plans in 1893. Claiming to fear for their democratic rights, rich lobbyists of the sugar industry had called on the USA for military assistance and Washington followed this request immediately, eventually even turning Hawaii into US territory in 1898.

This unusual step of a military acquisition of foreign territory has to be explained by the growing importance assigned to Hawaii at that time. The archipelago's sugar and molasses industries had turned out as important suppliers of the American west coast, which had just been

permanently settled within the last decades. As the Panama Canal had not been opened yet, competitors from the Caribbean would have had to circumnavigate all South America, giving Hawaii's producers a huge locational advantage. In fact, Hawaii's location itself soon became more interesting than her products. At the turn of the century, the USA had come to see the islands as a gateway to new markets in Asia. These markets were vital for the United States' transformation into an industrialized nation. Due to domestic issues like the Civil War* and the subsequent Reconstruction Era* or the westward movement with its foundation of new states on her own continent, the US had not taken part in the imperial race yet. When she finally joined in the late 19th century, Africa had already been split up among the major European powers. Consequently, American traders had to turn towards Asia. Steam ships at that time could not cross the Pacific in one turn, however. But with a coaling port like Hawaii at their command, American ships could undercut the distance their European rivals had to go by approximately a quarter. Of course, a military protection of such a strategic trade route was quickly developed, too.

The USA and Japan: From Allies to Enemies

Immediately after they had claimed Hawaii as their territory, the USA began constructing a naval base in Pearl Harbor Bay in 1898. But the site remained comparably small at first, as the US navy was not intended as a colonizing force. It was primarily policing American trade routes. Nevertheless, this base soon saw minor actions when Washington dispatched troops for the Eight Nation Alliance* to help crush the Boxer Rebellion* in China. Here, the USA and Japan still joined sides to protect their ambassadors and their free access to the Chinese markets. However, American and Japanese interests should diverge soon after this cooperation. While the USA held on to her Open Door Policy*, Japan was eager to establish her own official empire. As their expansion in northeast Asia had to bring the Japanese into conflict with Russia at first, America saw no necessity for immediate interference, though. Even if the USA did not approve of Japan's imperial ambition as such, she welcomed it as a possible buffer to the advancing Bolsheviks. Moreover, Washington and her western allies certainly expected Japan to be too bogged down by that conflict to seriously disturb their own trade.

But Japan proved the west wrong. With her troops unaffected by World War I, Japan managed to hold the Soviets back and transformed the disputed area of Manchuria into her puppet state "Manchukuo" in 1932. This act not only fostered Japan's position in northeast Asia, it also starkly contradicted the principles of America's Open Door Policy and of the League of Nations. But Japan remained unimpressed by international criticism and left the organisation a year later. With France, Great Britain, and the USA focused on Hitler, Japan again gained valuable time for her unrestrained aggrandizement. Germany was therefore a natural ally for Japan. Such cooperation between Germany and Japan was supported by vaguely comparable ideologies, too:

As the terms 'Greater Germany' and 'Greater East Asia' reveal, both nations aimed at enlarging their territories in order to become self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency was proclaimed as the backbone to political and cultural independence and indeed propagated to be their people's only chance of survival. Pursuing their plans for Living Space* or a Co-Prosperity Sphere* respectively, Germany and Japan had to face the same opponents as well: The Soviet Union's official call for a communist world revolution openly contradicted German and Japanese ideologies. An Anti-Comintern Pact* had therefore already been made by Germany and Japan in 1936, guaranteeing mutual assistance in case of a Soviet attack. Japan and Germany were able to realize extensive parts of their territorial programmes in the following years. Not only did Japan conquer large parts of southern China, but she also began to move into western colonies like French Indochina and Dutch Indonesia since the early 1940s. This did not meet much resistance, as these colonizing powers themselves had been invaded by Germany in the meantime and consequently had been forced to leave their Asian possessions to Hitler's Far Eastern ally. In a new pact, Japan and Germany then officially defined the new order they had created in their spheres.

Their formal claim to future rule over Europe and East Asia, Japan, Germany, and Italy, allied by the Tripartite Pact*, showed the world that a peaceful return to economic and political freedom was not to be expected any longer. Consequently, Washington openly sided with the allies and attempted to destroy Japan's supremacy in Asia with a dual strategy. On the one hand, the USA tightened her economic sanctions, eventually cutting off Japan from vital deliveries of oil and scrap metal in July 1941. On the other hand, US armaments worth one and a half billion dollars were passed on to Japan's enemy, Chiang Kai-Shek*. In order to execute sanctions and arms transports, the US Pacific Fleet was transferred from its original base at San Diego to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Pearl Harbor Bay had been turned into a U.S. naval base soon after the U.S.A. had claimed Hawaii as their territory in 1898, which had long been under American influence (s. Zell, Imperialist Nations: Russia and the USA). Following World War II, Hawaii was admitted as the 50th state in 1959. To the government in Tokyo it was evident that her Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere could not be held up long under such conditions. Japan would either have to negotiate a compromise or quickly break her encircled position.

The Attack on Pearl Harbor

Although negotiations with the USA had been going on, Tokyo finally decided for the second option, a pre-emptive strike. On 7th December 1941, with surprise on its side, the Japanese Imperial Navy inflicted a heavy defeat on America's Pacific fleet when Admiral Yamamoto* attacked the U.S. navy units anchored in Pearl Harbor without a prior declaration of war. Dispatching two waves of airplanes from carriers about 270 miles off the islands, the Japanese managed to hit all eight battleships, sinking four of them. Eight minor ships were sunk and

188 planes destroyed. Having put almost all US navy and air force units in the South West Pacific out of action within twenty-four hours, the Japanese could rush through that vast area easily. In less than a year, they took British Malaya, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies, a vital region for supplies and all necessary raw materials. In May 1942, the Japanese Empire was at the peak of its extension, covering almost a sixth of the world's surface. To stabilize this position, Japan aimed at establishing a defensive belt from British Burma to the Marshall and the Solomon Islands, and special importance was attached to the conquest of New Guinea. America's intervention at the Battle of the Coral Sea put a stop to these plans, however. This battle is often seen as an early turning point in the war: it disclosed the cardinal errors in Japan's original tactics, all dating back to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The military errors here had been threefold. Firstly, bombarding ships at their base made them easy targets, but it also made raising their wrecks comparably easy. The speed of the American repair works relied on Admiral Yamamoto's second mistake: afraid his fleet might run out of fuel, he had not allowed a third wave of attack, which might have targeted supply buildings, oil tanks, airfields, and the like. With Pearl Harbor's infrastructure still mostly intact, US salvage operations could begin immediately. Due to Yamamoto's third and biggest mistake, the most important part of America's Pacific fleet did not even need any salvaging: When the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked, all three aircraft carriers normally stationed at Pearl Harbor were at sea. The US navy was already able to carry out a retaliatory strike on 18th April 1942. Its carrier *Hornet* launched sixteen light bomber planes about 1,500 kilometres off Japanese mainland. Colonel James Doolittle* and his squadron then assailed several major industrial cities like Tokyo and Yokohama. Although actual damage was small, the psychological effect was immense. Killing about fifty and injuring up to four hundred people, the Japanese public suddenly did not feel invulnerable any longer. Instead, it had been given a foretaste of the American goal to eliminate Japan as an enemy altogether.

In this respect, the "Doolittle Raid" highlighted not only Japan's military failure to put out American carriers, but also her wrong diplomatic assumptions. Probably misled by America's isolationist policy during the 1930s, Tokyo had certainly hoped the USA might finally accept co-existence with a Japanese Empire in the Pacific. Pearl Harbor was thus primarily aimed at preventing any US resistance to her scheduled expansions in Southeast Asia. But most Japanese leaders did not perceive the attack as an inevitable trigger to a full scale war. Roosevelt's first official response to the onslaught, however, already proved how mistaken such a notion had been. In his speech before the joint session of Congress on 8th December 1941, the American President immediately asserted, "we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will see to it that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again."¹ So Roosevelt not only asked Congress to declare war on Japan, he indirectly set the only acceptable war aim, too:

¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "A Date Which Will Live in Infamy" War Address, December 7, 1941; as reprinted in: *Teaching with Documents*, Vol. 3, published for the National Archives and Records Administration by ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2002.

the USA would not stop short of an unconditional Japanese surrender. And with large parts of their Pacific Fleet almost instantly back in action by 1942, the USA relentlessly headed towards that goal.

“Germany First” and “Island Hopping”

To reach their ultimate destination as quickly as possible, the USA adopted a strategy called “island hopping.” On their way to mainland Japan, they would not take every island garrisoned by the Japanese but would rather circumnavigate heavily fortified positions. This way, island hopping would not only spare the Americans time, but also manpower and ammunition. These aspects were of high importance because the USA was also entangled in Europe when Germany and Italy had declared war upon her on 11th December 1941. Despite the fact that Japan had been the aggressor and that the Tripartite Pact only committed the signatories to mutual support in case of an American assault, Hitler and Mussolini had both jumped to Japan’s assistance anyway. This step did not prove successful eventually, but it bound many US forces to Europe nevertheless.

This situation was fostered by the Anglo-American “Germany first” agreement. This basic outline of the two countries’ cooperation was extended to all allies at the Arcadia Conference* in January 1942. Here, the USSR, Great Britain, and the USA determined to free Europe before turning their attention to Asia. From a British perspective, this decision was owed to the direct threat of her homeland, of course. For the USSR this direction was predestined by the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact*. Signed in April 1941, this pact was both countries’ attempt to formally put aside their disputes over Manchukuo in order to focus on their rising tensions with Germany and the USA respectively. Now that these tensions had each erupted into open warfare, both nations were keen on honouring their agreement. This treaty indirectly pushed Washington towards “Germany first” as well. Though retaliation in the Pacific looked more pressing to the American populace, Washington feared that the Soviets’ neutrality in Asia might give them an advantage in Europe. Focussing on one war arena only, they might be the ones to free most countries from Hitler. Such a situation was already anticipated to create an ideological imbalance in post-war Europe. Consequently, Roosevelt felt urged to go along with the plan of turning towards Europe first in order to keep his own suspicious ally in check there.

For the Pacific fleet, this broad political direction meant making ends meet. In this situation, island hopping turned out to be a feasible approach on the whole. At some places, Japanese troops were bypassed so thoroughly that they kept on fighting throughout the late 1940s. In a few incidents this can be attributed to a simple lack of communication. For example, at the Philippine island of Lubang, about forty Japanese soldiers emerged from their hiding in the jungle in early 1946, completely unaware of the end of the war. This also illustrates general Japanese reluctance to surrender. Based on a crude adoption of bushido, the tra-

ditional Samurai code of conduct, Japanese propaganda hailed death in battle as salvation and put committing suicide over capture. Of course, such ferocious fighting also raised the American death toll considerably. In order to keep their casualties low, the USA tried to rely on their equipment as much as possible.

5 As the Japanese could not keep up in this battle of material, they finally resorted to even fiercer adherence to the Samurai tradition. Claiming it the greatest honour to die for the empire, Japanese military leaders created Kamikaze units. These consisted of pilots who were ordered to hit enemy targets with their planes, not only their bombs or torpedoes. To the Americans, Kamikaze attacks must have conveyed the picture of a thoroughly fanatic nation.
10 Any attempt to conquer the Japanese mainland would therefore inevitably lead to horrible bloodshed. This impression is often cited as the reason for President Truman's* decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Undoubtedly, sparing troops was an important reason to use atomic bombs to end the war. But this was certainly not the only aspect Truman considered. Besides saving American lives, the
15 bombs were meant to save time as well. This becomes obvious when you take into account that the US had closed in around Japan by early 1945 and had started to firebomb important industrial cities with their new B-29 Superfortresses. In one of these raids on 9th March 1945, three quarters of Tokyo was burned down and presumably 100,000 people were killed, making it the worst air raid in history. Continuing such operations, Japanese resistance would certainly have been broken sooner or later. But Truman felt in no position to wait. As Germany
20 had capitulated on 8th May, the Anti-Hitler-Coalition was beginning to disintegrate. Though the big three still agreed on an ultimatum to Japan at the Potsdam Conference*, they began to differ openly on many other points. The western allies and the Soviet Union could not agree on a common scheme of reparations, for example, and Stalin showed himself unwilling to
25 loosen his grip on occupied areas in central Europe. Against this backdrop, Truman was afraid that a similar situation might occur in Asia. Indeed, Stalin had already laid the foundations for Soviet expansion in the Far East by cancelling the Neutrality Pact with Japan as early as 5th April. Moreover, the USSR's proximity to the contested area would give her a geographical advantage over the USA again. Consequently, Truman might have seen the atomic bomb as
30 his chance to keep the Soviets at bay in Asia. He was also aware of the fact that the Soviets had launched their own nuclear programme and that the time span of America's lead might therefore be very limited. When Japan failed to react to the allied ultimatum of 26th July, the US President ordered the bombing of Hiroshima.

The raid was carried out on 6th August. The tail gunner of the B29 bomber, from which
35 the bomb was dropped, saw the world go purple as a fireball spread across the landscape with a force of a 500 mile an hour wind. The fireball generated a temperature of 6,000 degrees cen-

tigrade. Another member of the bomber crew gazed at the gigantic mushroom cloud over 6 kilometres high and exclaimed, ‘My God, what have we done?’² The city was devastated, about a third of its 300,000 inhabitants were killed, another third injured. For weeks to follow, victims of the air raid began to suffer from a mysterious illness: their skin became disfigured
5 with tiny bleedings, their hair fell out, and finally they died. For a long time radiation caused terminal diseases like cancer. The USA did not wait to see these long-term effects, however.

Just three days after Hiroshima, the USA dropped a second nuclear bomb on Nagasaki. Again, various explanations for this act have to be taken into account. Most obviously, the Japanese Empire had not yet announced their unconditional surrender. A second reason for the
10 short time span between the two nuclear assaults was an upcoming storm front. As the bomb was to be dropped at sight, the officer in charge carried out the mission two days ahead of schedule. A third reason might again be seen in the Soviet advance towards the area. The bombing of Nagasaki might therefore have been an attempt to make Japan surrender before Soviet troops would arrive. This way, the ensuing occupation would remain solely under US
15 control, establishing Japan as an American stronghold in East Asia. Japan’s final surrender on 9th August 1945 was probably driven by both reasons, American bombs and approaching Soviets. Thus, emperor Hirohito* sent an offer of surrender to the Allies immediately after Nagasaki. This proposition, including Hirohito’s sole condition of maintaining the monarchy, was accepted by the allies on 14th August 1945, officially ending the Second World War.

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² Snellgrove, *The Modern World since 1870*, pp. 200, 201; *The New Penguin Dictionary of Modern History* ‘Hiroshima’