

History of Japan and Attack on Pearl Harbor

World War II began in the late 1930s, but the roots of the conflict went back further than that. In Germany, a weak economy and a humiliating defeat in World War I (1914–1918) had created an atmosphere ripe for political extremism. Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany in the 1930s as the leader of the Nazi Party. As Germany's dictator, he was determined to create a racially purified German empire that he called the Third Reich.

On September 1, 1939, the German army overran Poland. In response, France and Britain declared war on Germany. In June 1940, Italy's dictator Benito Mussolini sided with Hitler. War engulfed Europe. Reluctant to get involved in a European war, the United States remained neutral. But by early 1941, the United States was supporting countries fighting against the Axis powers of Germany, Italy—and Japan.

In Asia, Japan was a growing industrial power with ambitions to build an empire of its

own. An island nation with limited land and natural resources, Japan looked to other Asian countries for oil, rubber, and raw materials to keep its industries and military growing. After wars with China (1894–1895) and Russia (1904–1905), Japan gained territory in Taiwan, Manchuria, and Korea.

In 1926, Emperor Hirohito came to the throne. According to national Japanese mythology, Hirohito was a sacred descendent of the gods. As emperor, Hirohito also was supreme commander of the imperial forces and head of state, although he had no official political power. The prime minister, a close circle of advisers, and the parliament governed the country. Yet as subjects of the emperor, the Japanese people were to give their complete allegiance to Hirohito. As their emperor, Hirohito was above all and held complete authority.



Emperor Hirohito, shown here in an undated photo, became emperor of Japan on December 25, 1926, at the age of twenty-five. His reign was named Showa, meaning "Enlightened Peace."

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As Japan's military power increased, the nation began building its Asian empire in earnest. In 1937 the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Manchuria, attacked Shanghai, then swept into the ancient city of Nanjing. The army brutally tortured and killed hundreds of thousands of Chinese people in those cities.

Needing more oil and rubber for its warships and planes, Japan looked to colonies in Southeast Asia held by the Americans, the British, the French, and the Dutch. To limit Japan's aggression, the United States led an international ban on trade, cutting off three-quarters of Japan's imports and 90 percent of its oil supply. The ban pushed Japan into making a choice: abandon plans for an empire or risk war with the West.



General Hideki Tojo became Japan's prime minister in October 1941, just two months before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. Known as the Razor for his quick decision making, he urged Japan to join with Germany and Italy as an Axis power. Tojo led Japan through much of the Pacific War until he was forced to resign in 1944.

Japanese prime minister Hideki Tojo, a former army general, favored war. The only force that could stop Japan's push for a larger empire was the US Pacific Fleet moored at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, then a territory of the United States. Gambling that Americans would have little interest in a war in Asia, Tojo made a calculated decision to attack.

The morning of December 7, 1941, 353 Japanese fighter planes, bombers, and torpedo planes bombed the fleet at Pearl Harbor. Within two hours, 2,335 American servicemen were dead, more than three hundred planes were destroyed or damaged, and eight battleships demolished or badly damaged. With the Pacific Fleet crippled, Japan expected the strike would weaken Americans' will to fight. Instead, Pearl Harbor became a rallying cry for revenge.

The day after the attack, US president Franklin D. Roosevelt declared war on Japan. December 7, 1941, he said, was "a date which will live in infamy." Within three days, Allied powers led by the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union joined together to fight the Axis powers. World War II had become a deadly global war.

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Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. December 7, 1941.



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The world was at war for four long years. Italy surrendered in October 1943. Germany surrendered in May 1945. Only Japan kept fighting. By the summer of 1945, as the Allies planned a massive sea invasion of Japan, US B-29 bombers were firebombing Japanese cities, one after another, with no plans to stop until Japan surrendered.

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Excerpt from *Pearl Harbor* by Stephen Krensky

The news abroad was bad and getting worse. Europe had been at war for two years; the forces of Nazi Germany had already defeated many countries, from Poland in the East to France in the West. Great Britain still fought on, but her cities had been bombed and her defenses were weakening. “We shall fight in the fields and in the streets,” Prime Minister Winston Churchill had declared, “we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”

While Churchill rallied the British people, war also loomed across the Pacific. For years, the Empire of Japan had steadily expanded its influence in the Far East. Now, Japanese ships and troops were moving to strategic locations throughout Southeast Asia.

So far the United States remained at peace. President Roosevelt tried to make it clear that the United States could not afford to just sit back and watch. The war in Europe, he explained, was like a fire at a neighbor’s house. If the neighbor “can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant,” he said, “I may help him to put out the fire.” And if that fire is extinguished, the president, went on, the whole neighborhood may be saved from going up in flames.

Still, America was officially neutral. It was not just a question of choosing between right and wrong. The country was still recovering from hard times. The nation’s army and navy were also in poor shape; there were not enough soldiers to fight or guns and ships to fight with. Young men were still enlisting, getting physicals, and being trained for combat, but their numbers were limited. In 1940, there were 190,000 American soldiers compared to 320,000 in Japan and 800,000 in Germany. Before challenging these forces, America had a lot of catching up to do. At such a time, predicting the future was almost impossible. But one thing was clear: the United States was not ready to jump into a war on its own.

For Japan, the war in Europe appeared as a special opportunity. France, Holland, and Great Britain each had valuable Asian colonies producing rice, oil, or rubber. For the Japanese, who relied on other countries for many raw materials, capturing these prizes was a tempting prospect. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Japan had largely kept apart from the rest of the world. But after the American commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan to open up for trade in 1853, Western science and invention had followed, and the natural resources that those inventions required had helped to fuel the Japanese quest for expansion.

But before the Japanese could begin leapfrogging across the Pacific, they had to deal with the United States. As an ally of the European countries, the United States would not stand around while the Japanese swallowed up one European colony after another. Some Japanese leaders, however, were not worried about the United States. They thought Americans were soft and aimless; they would not have the spirit to fight a lengthy war that did not threaten their homeland. But the head of the Japanese navy, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, disagreed. He was well aware of the country’s industrial strength. America might seem like a slumbering giant, but he was hesitant to wake it up. Therefore, if the Japanese government insisted on war, Yamamoto thought there was only one way to win it. A first strike against the United States must be planned, a strike so crippling that America would not recover for a long time.

The strike itself would not signal the first step in an invasion. Conquering the United States was not a Japanese goal. Japan wanted something simpler: to gain enough time to secure other Pacific conquests. Would Americans choose to fight and die halfway around the world to save people and places that most of them could never find on a map? Yamamoto didn’t think so.

By October of 1941, pressures were building in the Japanese government to take action. Already, the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands together had cut off Japan from all sources of imported oil. Without oil, Japan certainly could not fight a war, but it also could not survive in peace. Japan had to act before its resources ran out. Japan also had a new prime minister and military leader – General Hideki Tojo. While the Emperor Hirohito was Japan’s supreme ruler, General Tojo wielded a great deal of power. The army was eager for war, and the Empire of Japan had not been defeated in more than one thousand years.

As dawn broke on the morning of December 7, William Outerbridge stood aboard the destroyer *U.S.S. Ward*. The *Ward* was patrolling the waters off Hawaii, and Outerbridge was scanning the ocean for anything out of the ordinary. Suddenly, he caught sight of a submarine heading toward Pearl Harbor. No friendly ship

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had any business being in such a place, and Outerbridge ordered the *Ward's* guns to open fire. When the sub's conning tower was hit at 6:54 AM, the submarine submerged. Soon the *Ward* spotted another submarine and fired depth charges against it. Shortly before 7:00 AM, soldiers at an army radar station on Oahu noted a large blip on the screen. At first, the soldiers on duty thought the equipment was malfunctioning, but after checking it over, they reported the sighting. News of both incidents made its way to military headquarters, but neither incident drew much attention. No American or British officials expected Japan to directly attack the United States. Hawaii and the American mainland, they thought, were too far from the territories the Japanese wanted to be likely targets.

Sadly, they were mistaken. A Japanese strike force – six aircraft carriers with supporting battleships and cruisers – had sailed from Japan on November 25. Hoping to escape detection, the fleet had kept to stormy seas 275 miles north of Hawaii. American radio operators detected low-frequency communications coming from the area. Unfortunately, no one investigated the matter. From that unsettled patch of ocean, more than three hundred bombers and fighters were launched in two waves before and after dawn on December 7.

Several hours passed before the Japanese planes, which had been flying at 9,800 feet, broke through the cloud cover. Although the Japanese still hoped for a surprise attack, they were not counting on it. Yet, Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, leader of the Japanese forces, found the skies empty. No one was stirring, no defense was waiting for him. Celebrating his good fortune, he radioed the order to attack. “Tora! Tora! Tora!”

Down on the ground, long lines of servicemen were waiting for breakfast; others were in the cabins aboard their ships, wrapping Christmas presents to be mailed home that week. The unexpected rumble of planes overhead drew curious glances, but no one realized the danger until the Japanese Zeros flew in and began firing their machine guns.

The bombs began falling at 7:55 AM. By 8:25 AM, the first waves of torpedoes and dive-bombers struck. Ninety-six American ships sat in the harbor, including all eight battleships of the Pacific fleet. They bobbed there like ducks in a barrel, unable to move and unprepared to fight back. On the *Arizona*, the bombs hit the forward turret and blew a hole in the boiler beneath. The sudden explosion rocked the ship, killing one thousand men before they even knew the air-raid alarms had sounded. A wall of fire engulfed the *Tennessee*, and five torpedoes scuttled the *Oklahoma*. The *Maryland*, *West Virginia*, and *California*, were soon heavily damaged. The *Nevada* was crippled as she tried to head out to sea. Only the *Pennsylvania*, undergoing repairs in a dry dock, was less heavily hit. As the battleships came under fire, crewmen tried to jump into the water and swim to safety, but a thick slick of oil was gushing from the damaged ship and burning across the water; many of the sailors never made it to shore. At Wheeler and Hickam Air Fields, the Japanese destroyed hundreds of parked planes. They were all huddled together wingtip-to-wingtip, which made them easier to guard from island-based sabotage. Unfortunately, it also made them easier to destroy from the air. At 8:40 AM, the second wave of Japanese planes crossed Oahu... By 10:00 AM, the battle was over. Dazed crewmen searched for lost friends in the burning waters and leveled buildings. The Zeros were gone as quickly as they had come, leaving behind pillars of smoke and fire that burned long into the day and night...

The news of Pearl Harbor had swept across the country with hurricane force, leaving both horror and disbelief in its path... The losses, after all, had been horrible: 2,330 servicemen and 100 civilians were dead. Another 2,000 were wounded. All 8 American battleships had been sunk or crippled, and 188 aircraft had been destroyed on the ground. The Japanese had also struck the British in Malaya and Hong Kong, and American bases in the Philippines and other islands. There was some good news. Pearl Harbor's dockyard facilities and oil stores were unharmed. Most importantly, the two American aircraft carriers, *Enterprise* and *Lexington*, were still safely out at sea. Had they been destroyed as well the Japanese victory might well have been complete. Even so, the Japanese now controlled the Pacific. Both Admiral Yamamoto and Emperor Hirohito believed their mission had been a success. With the American forces so deeply wounded, they would never recover in time to challenge the Japanese advances. They were wrong. Thousands swarmed into military recruiting offices to enlist. Congress immediately declared war on Japan. Three days later, Nazi Germany, Japan's ally, declared war on the United States.