Japanese Invasion of Manchuria

During September 1931, the Empire of Japan invaded Manchuria as part of a greater plan for Japanese expansion. Japan annexed the country and setup a puppet government called Manchukuo. Japan invaded Manchuria as a direct result of their growing industrialization and militarization in Asia. In addition, the invasion was also caused by a growing need for natural resources and growing dependence on oil and metal from primary importer, the United States of America. Due to American neutrality and trade restrictions, the Japanese government was forced to look elsewhere for resources in their pursuit for expansion into other Asian territories.

The invasion of Manchuria is significant as it reflects the first act of aggression and step toward a conflict in the Pacific. In addition, the invasion of Manchuria was seen as a ‘lifeline’ for the Japanese due to the natural resource rich lands of Manchuria. The Japanese viewed Manchuria as an important piece to their economy and growing industrial sector.

Western nations, including the United States of America, were shocked by the events and Japanese aggression. The League of Nations formally rebuked the actions of the Japanese government and its acts of aggression. As a result, the Japanese withdrew from the League of Nations.
Second Sino-Japanese War

The Second Sino-Japanese War was a conflict between China and the Empire of Japan between 1937 and 1945. Some scholars consider the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War to be the actual beginning of World War II, and was the largest Asian war in the 20th century. The conflict was directly related to the Empire of Japan’s imperialist policies, desire to expand, and need for natural resources and food.

Major events of the Second Sino-Japanese War include the Battle of Shanghai where the Japanese captured the major port city of Shanghai and the Nanjing Massacre. In addition, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States formally entered WWII, China received military aid from the United States which assisted in the fight against the Japanese.

After the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States, the Japanese surrendered to the allies on September 2, 1945. It was not until September 9, 1945 that the Japanese formally surrendered and relinquished their occupation of Chinese territory. Finally, the conclusion of the Second Sino-Japanese War saw China recognized as one of the “Big Four” allies and received a seat as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.
Japanese Invasion of French Indochina

The Japanese invasion of French Indochina had many direct connections to the Pacific War during World War II. The invasion caused a short conflict between Japanese forces and French forces with the Japanese eventually taking over French Indochina. The Japanese invaded French Indochina to cut off Chinese supply lines for fuel and military aid. Additionally, the Japanese government was cautious to fully occupy French Indochina for fear of deteriorating relations with the United States and Great Britain.

Angered by increasing Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia and the invasion of French Indochina, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered all Japanese assets in the United States to be seized in retaliation. The Japanese government then turned their attention to further expanding throughout Southeast Asia in search for more access to natural resources and food. A later response by the United States would be a full embargo of oil provided to the Japanese. This embargo would cut off the Japanese to its greatest source of fuel and play a role in direct retaliation against the United States military in the Pacific.
American Oil Embargo

As a result of increased Japanese aggression in Asia and the invasion of French Indochina, the United States implemented a complete oil embargo on all exports to Japan starting August 1, 1941.

The decision effectively cut-off the Japanese from the bulk of their fuel supply. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s actions forced Japan to lose access to three quarters of its international trade and the majority of its oil imports as Great Britain also would restrict trade with Japan.

The embargo forced Japan into a corner and having to choose between reducing tensions with the United States and Great Britain, or further pursue their interests in Southeast Asia by taking over more land and resources, such as Saigon, and risk further tensions with the western nations. Ultimately, Japan would seize Saigon and access to more oil, but at the same time started to put into place plans to attack the United States Navy in the Pacific in an attempt to reduce American influence in Asia.
Pearl Harbor

“Today, December 7th, 1941, A day which will live in infamy!” - President Roosevelt

On December 7th, 1941, the United States of America was attacked at Pearl Harbor (Honolulu, HI) by naval forces of the Empire of Japan. The attack on the United States by the Empire of Japan forced the United States to end their policy of isolationism and enter World War II. The United States declared war on Japan, and as a result, Germany declared war on the United States. This pushed the United States into a two front war, which is what FDR was trying to avoid.

The attack on Pearl Harbor was particularly damaging to the United States Pacific Fleet. Approximately 2,400 people died in the attack and another 1,000 were wounded. Additionally, 20 naval ships were destroyed or damaged, including eight battleships, and approximately 300 airplanes were destroyed (History.com). The attack by the Japanese badly damaged the Pacific Fleet, but it did not cripple it. Most of the ships damaged or destroyed were battleships and other support ships. The heartbeat of the navy, the aircraft carriers, were safely stationed out at sea. In addition, the United States Navy was able to rebuild and rebound quickly due to the Japanese not attacking submarine docks, oil fields, and other onshore facilities. Furthermore, the Panama Canal served as a lifeline as the United States Navy was able to move warships from the Atlantic to the Pacific expeditiously.
Executive Order 9066/Japanese Internment

After the Japanese surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, the United States not only entered WWII, but also entered into a state of fear and policies restricting civil liberties toward Japanese Americans. On February 19, 1942, FDR authorized Executive Order 9066, which prompted the designation of military zones throughout the country where “any and all persons may be excluded”. 9066 effectively authorized the forced relocation of Japanese Americans living on the west coast of the United States into internment camps.

The forced relocation of Japanese Americans was spurred by fear of potential Japanese spies living on the west coast attempting to coordinate an attack on the United States mainland. In addition, the internment of Japanese Americans led to a high-level Supreme Court case in Korematsu v. United States (1944) where Fred Korematsu challenged the authority of the government to forcibly remove him from his home and restrict his civil liberties. The court would side with the government and proclaimed the relocation order to be constitutional per the wartime clause of the Fifth Amendment.
Battle of Midway/Island Hopping

The Battle of Midway was a crucial battle and turning point during the Pacific War for the United States Navy. The United States Navy defended Midway Island from an attack by the Japanese Imperial Navy. Prior to this battle, the Japanese Imperial Navy had swept through any battles experienced in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The American Navy not only defended the island, but delivered devastating damage to the Japanese Navy from which it would never fully recover.

The Japanese looked to expand their sphere of influence in the Pacific and hoped another loss by the United States Navy would force the U.S. out of WWII. Therefore, giving Japan full control of the Pacific. However, the Americans were able to break the Japanese code and knew in advance of the attack, which allowed the U.S. to position its own counterattack. The Battle of Midway and the Guadalcanal Campaign are viewed as turning points in the Pacific War as the Americans went on the offensive following these battles and began to push the Japanese back to the Island of Japan through what is known as “Island Hopping”.

The counter-offensive known as “island hopping” was a plan to capture key islands, one after another, until the Island of Japan came within range of American bombers.
Doolittle Raid

The Doolittle Raid was an aerial bombing attack on the City of Tokyo in retaliation for the attack on Pearl Harbor. The attack on Tokyo produced little in the way of damage to Japanese assets, but it provided a big boost in morale for the American military and also at home in support of the war effort. The air raid also served as evidence that the Japanese mainland was susceptible to an air attack by the Americans.

The attack was planned by Lieutenant James Doolittle. The plan called for 16 B-25 bombers to takeoff from an aircraft carrier (U.S.S. Hornet), attack coordinated targets in Tokyo, and then continue on to China to land.

While the air raid was a propaganda victory at home for the United States, questions and fears were raised in Japan about the ability to defend the island. These fears would be recognized later as the United States would conduct a bombing campaign toward the end of the Pacific War now known as the Firebombing of Tokyo.
USA Deploys Two Atomic Bombs

After the secret development of the atomic bomb through the Manhattan Project, President Harry Truman faced an extremely difficult decision. President Truman was faced with either risking the lives of hundreds of thousands of military personnel by invading Tokyo and the Japanese mainland, or deploying an atomic weapon with the hopes of forcing the Japanese to surrender. However, the Truman administration was not completely sure of the power and damage that the atomic weapons would inflict. Ultimately, Truman decided at the Potsdam Conference to use the atomic bombs as an attempt to force the Japanese to surrender.

On August 6th, 1945, the United States dropped “Little Boy”, an atomic bomb, on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The atomic bomb was dropped from the Enola Gay, a B-29 Bomber. “Little Boy” was a uranium bomb that created a tremendous firestorm and caused a total fatality count of approximately 237,000 people. The city of Hiroshima was completely annihilated.

Three days would go by without a Japanese response, so the United States dropped a second bomb nicknamed “Fat Man” on the city of Nagasaki. However, Nagasaki was not the originally intended target. The intended target was Kokura where the Japanese held one of their largest munitions plants, but unfavorable weather conditions changed the course of the bombing. Approximately 80,000 people would perish as a result of the atomic bomb in Nagasaki. On August 14, 1945, Japan surrendered.
V-J Day

August 14, 1945, the Japanese government surrendered to the Allied forces to effectively end World War II. Victory over Japan Day is celebrated on August 14th and 15th to symbolize the surrender of the Japanese. V-J Day is also used to celebrate the formal surrender of the Japanese which occurred on September 2, 1945 on the battleship USS Missouri.

V-J Day also symbolizes the end of six years of bloodshed and tensions across the globe connected to World War II. According to History.com, the Potsdam Declaration attempted to force a Japanese surrender on July 26, 1945 in exchange for a peaceful government that expressed the will of the Japanese people or face utter destruction. At the Potsdam Conference where the declaration was constructed, President Truman had also made the decision to use the atomic arsenal in lieu of putting thousands of American lives at risk via a land invasion.

Today, V-J Day is still celebrated in many cities with annual parades. In addition, Rhode Island is the only state to dedicate a holiday to celebrate the American war victory.