World War II and empire

ASHLEY JACKSON
King's College, London, UK

War began for America with an attack on a Pacific Ocean colony, while Britain's first significant victory was achieved by a colonial army fighting in Africa. Following the fall of France, most "French" soldiers still under arms were African, and free Dutch and French forces fought on against the Axis from overseas colonial footholds following the occupation of their European homelands. In China and Russia, and throughout much of the rest of the world, people fought to resist the imperialism of the Japanese and the Germans, or were caught in the eye of a storm caused by imperial competition between old colonial powers and their would-be successors. Beneath much of the "global war" activity and action on the major battlefields, in many parts of the world nationalists and anti-colonial actors sought to throw off the yoke of colonialism – be it that of long-established or newly minted colonial powers – and to promulgate their own visions of future national independence. Imperial and racial ideologies – Aryan superiority, Japanese dominance masquerading as Asian "co-prosperity" – mixed with anti-colonialism and ethnic nationalism. The world was changing, rapidly, and apparent certainties – such as the strength and stability of colonial empires ruled by white men – were being overturned. Caught in the middle of other people's wars, the hundreds of millions of people who happened to live in colonial or semi-colonial zones were affected, almost always in deleterious ways, by the outriders of world war: food shortages, inflation, violence, migration, occupation, and the insatiable demand for military and non-military labor, sometimes voluntary, more often coerced.

Though seldom viewed through an imperial lens, World War II was in numerous ways a war of empire. Some of the major belligerents fought in order to gain the fruits of empire – prestige, living space, land, markets, resources, and control of sea lines of communication. The aggression of the Axis powers was driven by a lust on the part of their leaders for the spoils of empire. Germany sought to conquer and dominate the European continent. Italy had ambitions in southern Europe and Africa and sought to supplant Britain as the mistress of the Mediterranean. Japan had long targeted the Chinese mainland as an outlet for its expansionist tendencies, and now took aim at the colonies of America and Europe stretched enticingly across the Central Pacific, the East Indies, and Southeast Asia. Other belligerent powers, meanwhile, fought to protect the fruits of empire that they already enjoyed, in a war of the colonial "haves" versus the "have-nots." The major European colonial powers fought to protect both their overseas empires and their national homelands. All but the British failed on both counts, and the British war developed as one characterized by the defense of empire and the exploitation of imperial resources in order to achieve it.

There were numerous wars, and numerous wars of empire, taking place in different parts of the world during a period that the term "World War II" struggles to encapsulate. Though the "world war" known in Europe lasted from 1939 until 1945, the Spanish Civil War and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia which preceded it were connected and were marked by the imperial intent of key

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protagonists. For China, "the War of Resistance against Japan" began in the early 1930s as it sought to fend off violent Japanese imperialism. For Russia, the "Great Patriotic War" commenced with Hitler's imperial thrust in the summer of 1941, which sought to steal the land and enslave its inhabitants. For America, despite war-related activity in support of Britain beforehand, belligerent status began with Japan's quest for a new empire in December 1941.

THE BELGIAN, BRITISH, DUTCH, AND FRENCH EMPIRES

The story of the British Empire's war was one of imperial success in contributing toward Allied victory, on the one hand, and egregious imperial failure, on the other. Britain struggled to protect people and to feed them, and failed to win the loyalty of (for example) the colonial subjects of Burma and Malaya – many of whom viewed the end of British rule with an indifference that shocked the British – or anti-British political leaders in Burma, Egypt, India, Iran, and Iraq, men prepared to court the Nazis in their desperation to get the British out. Colonial elites in many parts of the empire saw the war as an opportunity to oust the British, which meant courting the Germans or the Japanese in a "my enemy's enemy is my friend" manner. Britain proved incapable of countering the corrosive effects of emerging anti-colonial superpowers that were ostensibly on the same side, or of cordoning off its own colonial affairs from the critical scrutiny of the newly founded United Nations.

The British lost colonies in South and Southeast Asia, the East Indies, the Far East, and the Pacific. Their most westward loss was British Somaliland: the British garrison escaped by sea to Aden where its commander, Major-General Alfred Godwin-Austen, remarked glumly that he was "the first to lose a bit of the Empire" (Stark 1985: 50). Though this minor colony in the Horn of Africa was soon reconquered as British imperial forces defeated the Italians in East Africa with relative ease, much more serious losses were to come. When Japan entered the war, British territories from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean, across South and Southeast Asia and on east toward Borneo, Hong Kong, and the Pacific, were lost. Large numbers of refugees sought to leave war zones, and for many colonial people east of Suez, the war brought the hardships of conflict and occupation. Britain was supported by significant military resources from the empire, including nearly 500 000 Africans, over two million Indians, and the significant land, sea, and air forces of the "white" Dominions. Colonies also provided essential foodstuffs, raw materials, and specialist products such as small arms ammunition. They provided infrastructure necessary for prosecuting military operations across the globe, including facilities for training over 100 000 pilots and air crew, shipyards, financial aid, and intelligence-gathering outposts. The British fought campaigns and stationed forces all over the imperial world, and utilized the military and other resources of Allied powers that had been defeated in Europe, employing Belgian, Dutch, and French forces in overseas theaters.

The Belgians, Dutch, and French were placed in the bizarre position of metropole–periphery inversion: with their European homeland conquered by the Germans, their overseas territories became bases from which to fight back. De Gaulle attempted to rally French colonies to the Free French cause, and moved to "liberated" Algiers in 1943 after the Anglo-American "Torch" invasion had finally cleared Axis forces from Africa. Though installed, however, it was the Americans who now called the shots. Thus French colonies were assailed by the enemy as well as by erstwhile allies. For example, Dutch and

French colonies in the East Indies and Southeast Asia were overrun by the Japanese, and French colonies in Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean, such as the Comoros Islands, Lebanon, Madagascar, Réunion, and Syria, were attacked by the British. France also suffered the indignity of being bankrolled by Britain, its old ally and rival; in return for supporting de Gaulle and his regime in its colonial enclaves, the British subordinated French resources and sometimes their political future to their own war effort and wider political aims. The French cause was further hindered by the debilitating civil war between Free France and Vichy France that was pursued in the colonies, diminishing the capacity of French elites to withstand the impositions of Japanese occupiers or American and British allies pursuing their own, not France's, interests. Given France's defeat in 1940 and the subsequent incarceration or destruction of its main military formations, both Free France and Vichy France came to rely on colonial resources for military and security requirements and attempts to regenerate fighting power. "The estimated 16 500 Free French military losses during campaigning in North Africa and Italy were primarily colonial. Villages in Morocco, Mali, and Algeria, not Brittany, the Ardèche, or the Pas-de-Calais, mourned the largest numbers of soldiers killed in French uniform after June 1940" (Thomas 2014: 47).

For many French imperial citizens the war was a disaster. French North Africa's economic fortunes declined precipitously and normal people struggled to feed themselves and keep themselves warm. War brought urban disorder and political violence and aided the rise of nationalists, such as the Viet Minh. Their cause was advanced, and that of the returning colonial power disadvantaged, by support afforded them by Allies seeking to weaken the Japanese (the same was true in Malaya).

The Belgian Congo remained under the control of the Belgian government-in-exile throughout the war. Its products proved important for the Allied war effort and its soldiers provided "Belgian" representation in certain theaters. The Congo's gold was exported, as were copper, palm oil, industrial diamonds, and lumber. But uranium was the most significant export in terms of the world war and was central to the Manhattan Project's creation of the atomic bomb that ended the war. In order to expedite the export of uranium from the Shinkolobwe mine in Katanga province, soldiers of the US Army's Corps of Engineers arrived to reopen the disused facility, develop new aerodromes, and build an improved port at Matadi. The large stockpile of uranium dispatched to New York in September 1940 by the director of the Union Minière du Haut Katanga was then supplemented by thousands of tons mined there and sold to the US army.

The connection between Belgium and this enormous Central African territory during the war provides a noteworthy example of how valuable colonies could be to their metropolitan masters. Though it had been defeated and occupied by the enemy, Belgium was able to gain significant strategic advantage because of its ownership of the Congo. Tax and revenue drawn from the Congo enabled the Belgian government and Free Belgian Forces to fund themselves rather than relying on subsidies from allies, and this meant that Belgian gold reserves remained intact, easing postwar reconstruction. The Belgian Congo also provided troops in the form of the Force Publique, the Congo's paramilitary force, which grew to number 40 000 during the war. Its units saw service in the East Africa campaign. After this campaign, a large Force Publique contingent was renamed the 1st Belgian Colonial Motorized Brigade Group and used for garrison duties in Egypt and Palestine, and over 13 000 Force

Publique troops served in Nigeria. There was also the 10th (Belgian Congo) Casualty Clearing Station, a medical unit which served with British forces in Somaliland, during the occupation of Vichy-held Madagascar, and in Burma.

Japan's entry into the war was sudden and catastrophic for the Western empires in the east. The Dutch Empire in the East Indies was entirely vanquished. American-British-Dutch-Australian Command had been established under General Archibald Wavell in January 1942 to defend the imperial holdings of all the colonial powers in the region, but amounted to far too little, too late. With the Royal Navy's Force Z (the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales* and the battlecruiser *Repulse*) destroyed off Malaya on December 10, 1941, the remaining naval forces of the four powers were defeated at the Battle of the Java Sea in February the following year. Supreme at sea, the Japanese could now pick off colonies of the Allies at will. While there was fierce fighting in places such as Ambon, Kalimantan, and Timor, this was not the case in places such as Bali where there were no Dutch troops. Java and Sumatra were prime targets. Initially the Japanese were sometimes welcomed as liberators – "our older brothers" come to replace Western domination with Asian unity. The impact on Indonesian society and politics was profound, leading to the Indonesian Revolution against returning Dutch rule at the end of the war. Japanese occupation had politicized Indonesian society as never before. Indonesians were educated, trained, and armed following Japan's rapid occupation as they sought to work through local elites and co-opt supporters. Remaining Dutch forces continued to fight under British command and used bases in Ceylon to conduct minor covert operations in the occupied Dutch East Indies and supported the wider war in the region. For many people in the Dutch East Indies, war brought not only the usual deprivations but also forced labor and famine.

GERMANY AND ITALY

The Italian Empire grew in Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa in the years before World War I. Ironically, failure to expand that empire as a result of the 1914–1918 conflict was a major stimulus for Mussolini's imperial ventures during the 1930s and the territorial calculations that led to his participation in World War II. To its chagrin, although it finished World War I on the winning side, the Treaty of Versailles awarded Italy no territorial spoils. This perceived injustice and the role played by greater powers, such as Britain, in denying Italian gains, fed a simmering imperial appetite. Mussolini desired a vast empire peopled by Italian settlers, and control of sea lanes dominated by the British and the French, including the prized Suez Canal. His colonial shopping list included places as diverse as Malta, Nice, and Uganda.

Italy's involvement in the Spanish Civil War was driven by these imperial ambitions: Mussolini wanted Spain as a client state and Spanish colonies in the Balearic islands and North Africa as prizes. The occupation of Majorca in 1936 went some way toward realizing these ambitions. On entering the war in June 1940, when it believed that Britain was nearly beaten, Italy sought gains in France and began its campaign for African expansion by invading British Somaliland, Egypt, Kenya, and the Sudan. Invasions of Greece and Yugoslavia further signaled Italy's appetite for territorial expansion as well as its embarrassing military performance, as was also the case in Africa. In both the European and North African theaters, German reinforcement was required, though in East Africa, the British crushed the Italians swiftly and

decisively. With Italy's surrender in 1943, Mussolini's dream of a new "Roman empire" died as ignominiously as he did, and Italy became a satellite of the Nazi Empire in the north and a battleground in the south as the Allies invaded.

Though Germany had been denuded of its overseas colonies as a result of its defeat in 1918, the country went to war in pursuit of European imperial ambitions: to gain (or regain) territory in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Poland, and Russia, to conquer living space for Germanic peoples in lands held by those considered racially inferior, and to harvest their resources. German-occupied territory spread as far as the Channel Islands, Scandinavia, the Baltic, the Mediterranean, and for a time North Africa, and German agents and military personnel made forays into Iran, Iraq, and Syria in an unsuccessful attempt to oust the British. Though remote from the European heartlands that exercised Hitler's imperial imagination, German policymakers also saw the potential for gains further afield – for the establishment of a German "Mittelafrika," for instance, and for hegemony in a Middle Eastern region swept clear of British overlordship.

JAPAN

As Japan industrialized in the late 19th century it grew as an imperial power. The defeat of China in the war of 1894–1895 established Japanese primacy on the Korean peninsula and the island of Formosa, though opposition from the Western powers obliged Japan to give up its claims in the Liaotung peninsula. Japan was now a fully-fledged imperial power, a position enhanced by its stunning victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. The subsequent peace treaty confirmed Japan's position in Korea (formally annexed in 1910) and southern Manchuria. Its reward for supporting the Allies in World War I was further colonial bounty, including some of Germany's Pacific colonies and Tsingtao on China's Shantung peninsula.

The interwar Depression and corresponding Western protectionism fueled a desire to escape the "encirclement" of Western powers in Asia and the Pacific. Part of the motivation behind the 1931 invasion of Manchuria and the foundation of the puppet state of Manchukuo was to prevent the constriction of the national economy. Pu Yi, the last Qing emperor, was established as Japan's puppet ruler in Manchukuo. In 1937, the "China incident" at the Marco Polo Bridge near Peking provided Japan with its pretext for an undeclared war on China and the next stage in Japan's empire-building project. Soon, Japan had articulated its imperial plans in the form of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

In 1939, Japanese and Russian forces clashed on the borders of Mongolia and Manchuria. Japan's decision to make war on America and the European powers in 1941 was motivated by the need to expand its territorial empire, to widen the "yen bloc," and to gain markets and essential resources such as oil. It sought to address the fear of encirclement with a quick strike calculated to yield colonies bearing raw materials by knocking out Allied naval power and obliging the Allies to concede territorial gains. The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere was an imperialist program devised by the Japanese government and intended to dominate a vast region in pursuit of Japanese aggrandizement. There were attractive elements, in the rhetoric at least; the Co-Prosperity Sphere promised a cultural and economic union of Asian states free from Western domination. But the sphere was always intended to be under Japanese leadership, meaning domination, often cruel and exploitative, more apparent the

weaker Japan's position vis-à-vis the Allies became as the war progressed. The irony for Japan was that no sooner had it gained a phenomenally large and rich empire than its ability to fully exploit it was severely constricted, not least because of the decimation of its merchant fleet and the steady decline of its navy. Forced labor – of Allied prisoners of war, enslaved subject populations, Korean sex workers – became a key characteristic. Hundreds of thousands of Koreans worked in Japan, many of them as forced laborers, and Koreans also served in the Japanese military and Japanese-recruited formations. Four to ten million people in Java were forced to perform military work. Japan's wartime empire included Attu and Kiska in the Aleutian Islands, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Brunei, Christmas Island, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Guam, Hong Kong, most of New Guinea, the Philippines, French Indo-China, Portuguese Timor, Thailand, Burma, Malaya, Sarawak, Singapore, British and Dutch Borneo, Java, Sumatra, part of the Solomon Islands, and Wake Island. It amounted to the most astonishing land grab in history.

THE SOVIET UNION AND THE UNITED STATES

The Soviet Union was the product of centuries of colonial expansion in Europe, Central Asia, and the Far East, and the war presented Moscow with opportunities to extend that empire while attaining ascendancy over an old imperial rival, Japan. Before Germany became the greatest threat to Russian national survival, Russo-German cooperation enabled territorial ambitions to be pursued: the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was a green light to both Soviet and German expansion in Europe. Both powers invaded Poland, and Russia made good its claims in the Baltic and also invaded Finland, where it was repulsed. Thereafter, for the Finns the war was dominated by resistance to Soviet encroachment, which for some time meant cooperation with the Germans. Many other European nations and would-be nations found themselves having to resist the incursions of the Axis powers and this often strengthened movements pursuing the goal of national sovereignty, through armed resistance and alliance with the Allies, often involving civil wars. Such countries included Greece, Romania, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia. By the end of the war, Russia had not only played a central role in defeating and occupying Germany and created a host of satellite states that would become a feature of the Cold War, it had made gains in Iran following the Anglo-Soviet invasion of 1941 and, right at the end of the conflict, invaded Manchukuo and other Japanese territories in the Far East.

America gained new territories as a result of the war, occupying and then retaining Japanese islands such as those of the South Sea Mandate (Palau, the Northern Marianas, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia which included Truk). But the war witnessed a transformative rise of American power in many other parts of the world where, though it did not gain formal rule over new colonies, rapidly growing political, military, and economic power carved out new spheres of influence and new regional hegemonies. Cuba, for instance, helped the American war effort and as a consequence benefited from Lend-Lease aid. It declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941, and Germany three days later. It granted America base facilities for aircraft operating against German submarines in the Caribbean, and the use of the important facilities of the port of Havana. America provided modern equipment to the Cuban military in return, and Cuban forces participated in the defense of the Caribbean, including the escort of Allied merchant shipping.

Across the globe, the war brought American military forces, American Lend-Lease aid, and – as a result – American political power to regions where before the war America had been either unrepresented or of less significance than other external powers, usually the old colonial nations. The 1940 destroyers-for-bases agreement with Britain gave America the right to build military bases and station troops on numerous British West Indian islands. In partnership with Britain, American troops took over important supply lines and air routes on the Gold Coast and in Iran, and American military power in the "China–Burma–India" theater went hand in hand with a growing American voice in Indian politics, not welcomed by the British but indicative of how the coming superpower would seek to influence the colonial policies of the European empires as it fashioned a new, American-shaped, world order.

By 1945, America had replaced Britain as the most important external player in the Mediterranean and had supplanted Britain as the guarantor of Australian and New Zealand security. Beyond this, by the end of the war and for long after, American forces were based all over the world, occupying and to a large extent administering the vanquished nations of Austria, Germany, Italy, and Japan and bankrolling exhausted allies such as Britain, and becoming the guarantor of their security, too. America's rising power granted it a strong and potentially decisive voice in the counsels of the European empires. It consciously sought to enhance its power, dispatching senatorial teams on overseas fact-finding missions which opened new windows on the world and offered lessons in what America needed to do to make good its power – to develop telegraph and cable communications, for example, to end dependence on British ones, and to be the leading power in postwar civil aviation.

American colonies were heavily involved in the war. The Philippines was invaded and captured, retaken by General MacArthur in 1944. Guam in the Western Pacific, the largest Micronesian island, was captured by the Japanese soon after Pearl Harbor, inaugurating two and a half years of brutal occupation, before American troops recaptured the island after vicious fighting in 1944 in which approximately 20 000 Japanese troops were killed. Puerto Rico was an American territory that participated in the war in numerous ways. Air bases were created, including a major facility at Punta Borinquen used by bomber and reconnaissance squadrons and a major naval base known as "Roosevelt Roads," intended to become the "Pearl Harbor" of the Atlantic. Over 65 000 Puerto Ricans served during the war, mostly in American formations, some seeing action in Europe and the Pacific, or the Puerto Rican National Guard, the duties of which included protecting American military installations on the island and in the British West Indian islands where America had been granted facilities. The 65th Infantry Regiment of the US army was composed of Puerto Ricans and expanded for war service. It was sent to the Panama Canal Zone to defend its Atlantic and Pacific flanks and then saw service at Casablanca, on the island of Corsica defending air bases as the Allied assault on southern Europe developed, and then in France from September 1944.

American Samoans were allowed to join the American military too. The Supply Department, for example, employed 2000 local personnel in its logistics operations. On Tutuila, a major naval facility was developed at Pago Pago, and the island was prepared for enemy attack. The number of military and supply ships visiting the port increased significantly, as did the number of US marines and other military personnel; by October 1942, there were nearly 15 000 American servicemen on Tutuila and Upolu. Thousands of Samoans also joined the forces, many

working as stevedores. The recruitment of colonial servicemen allowed American naval personnel to be engaged on other tasks. While the war brought economic and social opportunities to some of the Samoan population, it also brought disruption. Patterns of land use altered, as, for example, when 5000 acres were taken for the construction of an aerodrome. Throughout the Pacific and many other parts of the world, the war had a devastating effect upon the environment. Wage labor opportunities led to rural–urban migration and swelled the population of Pago Pago. The replacement of a plantation economy with a wage economy gave greater independence for young men from family-controlled lands, eroding traditional forms of social control.

CAUGHT BETWEEN EMPIRES

The extent to which World War II was a conflict that can be understood in terms of competing imperialisms is further illustrated by the situation facing neutral states. Imperial intrusion was central to the experience of many of the countries that were not already part of one or another empire. Afghanistan was buffeted by Britain, Germany, and Russia, and Thailand sought to retain its independence in the face of Japanese intrusion and Allied pressure. China was ransacked by Japanese troops throughout the 1930s and the first half of the following decade because of Japan's imperialist ambitions. So, too, were Korea and Vietnam, and here as elsewhere the consequences of colonial rule or imperial penetration had profound implications for the postwar world. For example, when Japan surrendered American forces landed in the south of Korea while Russia occupied the north, setting Korea on course for war and division. Iran, for long a zone of competition between competing imperial powers, was divided between invading British and Russian forces, the former joined by American troops as Lend-Lease and other aid was delivered to Russia via the Gulf and the trans-Iranian supply lines. The wartime occupation brought the Cold War to Iran and deeply marked its internal politics. In Europe, Iceland was invaded by the British for strategic reasons, Finland was preyed upon by both Germany and the Soviet Union, and the Portuguese Empire was subjected to the blandishments and threats of Axis and Allied powers alike.

Though Portugal remained neutral during the war, its colonies were affected by conflict in numerous ways: they were bases for the espionage and covert operations of Allied and Axis powers and they were coveted by belligerents because of their strategic location. British forces raided Portuguese Goa to destroy Axis merchant vessels that were transmitting intelligence regarding Allied ship movements to submarines in the Indian Ocean; British and Italian spy networks operated in Mozambique, the object of the former being the protection of shipping moving through the Mozambique Channel from the latter; Australian and Dutch forces invaded Portuguese Timor in December 1941 in order to forestall Japanese landings, an unannounced and unsuccessful operation that was resented by the Portuguese government; and the Portuguese government permitted Britain to ship 2000 Gibraltarians to Madeira when the colony's civilian population was removed for military reasons.

The Portuguese government came under pressure from the Allies to grant strategic concessions. The British and then the Americans desired access to the Azores in order to extend the range of their forces in the Atlantic. Bases here would afford better protection for Atlantic convoys, and offered a more direct route for aircraft traveling from North America to fighting fronts in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and beyond. When eventually granted, these facilities

shortened flight distances hugely. By 1944 the airfield on Terceira island was handling 1800 Allied flights a month, and Ponta Delgada on São Miguel was frequented by both Allied and Axis warships.

For centuries Afghanistan had been caught between the British and Russian empires. Afghanistan's buffer role, associated with the days of the "great game," was alive and well. So too, therefore, were the efforts of Afghan leaders to negotiate a path that allowed them as much autonomy as possible. Like Iran and other weak neutral countries fearing for their sovereignty, Afghanistan attempted to procure weapons with which to defend itself, though with very limited success. With Britain unprepared to supply arms to Afghanistan in any quantity, the government turned to Germany. Friendly relations had evolved, signified by weekly flights between Berlin and Kabul, growing trade and investment links, and German agreement to equip and train the Afghan army.

On the outbreak of war King Zahir Shah declared Afghanistan neutral, but it was not enough to keep his country free from the competing imperial projects of external actors. Germany sought to use Afghanistan to destabilize Britain and Russia, and it encouraged Russian ambitions in the region as a diversion. The German representative in Kabul, shortly after the fall of France, reported that members of the Afghan government were in favor of joining the Axis war effort and tying down British forces, in return for armaments, territorial gains in India, and assistance against Russian encroachment. There was also talk of "liberating" the millions of Afghans living in British India. German agents and weapons arrived in Afghanistan throughout 1940 – some under the guise of a party of scientists researching leprosy – and conducted reconnaissance and some minor sabotage operations over the border in India. Later in the war German agents tried to stimulate rebellion on the Russian border. When Britain and Russia became allies, the Afghan leadership had to pursue a different path. Playing the traditional rivals off against each other was now out of the question, and the joint invasion of Iran was a cause of great concern. Shortly after, the two allies pressured the Afghan government into expelling all Axis personnel. Neutrality was now a matter not of choice, but necessity, for the Afghan government.

China had been the focus of Japanese imperialist ambitions from the late 19th century. The "Twenty-One Demands" of 1915, and the war between the two powers that commenced in earnest in 1937, was a continuation of this. Japan sought natural resources, including food, export markets, cheap (or even better, free) labor, and a buffer zone against Russian expansion. Japan pushed the Western powers out of their concessions in Shanghai following its attack on the city in 1937, and in the same year captured the Chinese capital Nanking, leading to the infamous "rape" of the city involving the systematic murder of hundreds of thousands of people. Japanese power extended across China, even to Inner Mongolia and the Great Wall region. As it did so, it fought against the Chinese government and its Communist challenger, exploiting divisions in a land enduring a severe civil war. Despite the investment of enormous resources, the Japanese were ultimately unable to defeat the Chinese, who were supported by the Allies, particularly America. The Chinese government retreated to Chongqing, which suffered intensive aerial bombardment causing thousands of deaths. Most of the fighting, and most of the deaths in the war against Japan, occurred in China, not the Pacific theater or in South and Southeast Asia.

Thailand was another of the world's independent countries that was subjected to the intrusions of powerful nations, and

while it maintained significant autonomy, it was occupied by the Japanese and suffered substantial Allied bombing as a result. The Thai government had admired fascist achievements and encouraged nationalism and militarism, and developed an appetite for regaining provinces in French-ruled Cambodia and Laos. The Thai government responded pragmatically to the military and political pressures of war, and courted Japanese support for its territorial ambitions. When sporadic fighting broke out between Thai and French forces along Thailand's eastern frontier in late 1940 and early 1941, Japan used its influence with the Vichy regime to obtain concessions for Thailand. As a result, France agreed in March 1941 to cede 54 000 sq. km of Laotian territory west of the Mekong and most of the Cambodian province of Battambang to Thailand. The recovery of this lost territory and the regime's apparent victory over a European colonial power greatly enhanced the regime's reputation.

For the remainder of the war the challenge facing Thai leaders was to negotiate neutrality and independence, especially when the evaporation of British and French power in Southeast Asia deepened ties with the region's new hegemonic power, Japan. The alternative was to fight the Japanese and risk the type of occupation forced upon neighboring territories. To this end, in January 1942 Thailand declared war on America and Britain. This stance meant that the Thai monarch remained in place, and the Thai state kept control of its institutions and its military. But Thai freedom was significantly circumscribed, not least by the presence of over 150 000 Japanese troops in the country. Japan was also permitted use of strategic and military resources and infrastructure, including the railways, all of which became important for Japanese operations to the south – Malaya – and the north – Burma. Later in the war, as part of this game of quid pro quo, Japan permitted Thai annexation of the parts of Malaya that the British had taken from them and also of parts of Burma. As Japan's fortunes waned, risings were planned (as was their brutal suppression) and Free Thai forces were supported by American and British covert operations.

DECOLONIZATION AND THE END OF THE WAR

The empires of the European powers were shaken to their foundations as the war accelerated their decline while simultaneously facilitating the rise of new superpowers with their own forms of global imperialism. The European imperial states suffered such a diminution of their national power that they were fundamentally weakened and, in the postwar world, increasingly incapable of retaining their empires. A new world order dawned, one hostile to old-style European imperialism. The war, therefore, was a major solvent of European empires and a prelude to the new struggles of the Cold War.

SEE ALSO: America, United States of: 2. Overseas empire; America, United States of: 3. 20th century to the present; British Empire: 2. From 1914; Decolonization; Dutch Empire: 4. East Indies; French Empire: 1. General; Italian Empire; Japanese Empire; Nazi Empire; Russia: 5. Soviet (USSR)

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