

◀ CHAPTER 1 ▶

PATTERNS OF A RACE WAR

World War Two meant many things to many people.

To over fifty million men, women, and children, it meant death. To hundreds of millions more in the occupied areas and theaters of combat, the war meant hell on earth: suffering and grief, often with little if any awareness of a cause or reason beyond the terrifying events of the moment.

To nations everywhere, World War Two meant technological innovation, bureaucratic expansion, and an extraordinary mobilization of human resources and ideological fervor. Governments on all sides presented the conflict as a holy war for national survival and glory, a mission to defend and propagate the finest values of their state and culture. The Axis powers declared they were creating a virile new world order that both revitalized traditional virtues and “transcended the modern,” as some Japanese intellectuals phrased it. Allied leaders rallied their people under the banner of combating tyranny and oppression and defending an ideal moral order, exemplified by the Atlantic Charter and Franklin Roosevelt’s “four freedoms.” Many individuals gave their lives in the belief that they were sacrificing themselves for such ideals.

At the same time, to most high officials the war meant, above all, power politics at its fiercest. World War Two changed the face of the globe. It witnessed the rise and fall and rise again of empires—the swiftly shifting fortunes of the European powers and the Axis allies, the emergence of the American and Soviet superpowers—and no policymaker was

unaware of the stakes involved. Control of territory, markets, natural resources, and other peoples always lay close to the heart of prewar and wartime planning. This was certainly true of the war in Asia, where nationalist aspirations for genuine liberation and independence met resistance from Europeans, Americans, and Japanese alike. In Asia, the global war became entangled with the legacies of Western imperialism and colonialism in a manner that proved explosive, not only at the time but for decades thereafter.

To scores of millions of participants, the war was also a race war. It exposed raw prejudices and was fueled by racial pride, arrogance, and rage on many sides. Ultimately, it brought about a revolution in racial consciousness throughout the world that continues to the present day. Because World War Two was many wars, occurring at different levels and in widely separated places, it is impossible to describe it with a single phrase; and to speak of the global conflict as a race war is to speak of only one of its many aspects. Nonetheless, it is a critical aspect which has rarely been examined systematically.¹

Apart from the genocide of the Jews, racism remains one of the great neglected subjects of World War Two. We can gain an impression of its importance, however, by asking a simple question: when and where did race play a significant role in the war? The query may seem to border on the simplistic, but it turns out to have no simple answer—not even for the Holocaust. As has become more widely acknowledged in recent years, the destruction of European Jewry itself was neither an isolated event nor a peculiarly Nazi atrocity. The German extermination campaign was not limited to Jews but extended to other “undesirable” peoples as well. At the same time, there occurred a “hidden Holocaust”—that is, a conveniently forgotten one—in which the annihilation of the Jews was actively supported by French and Dutch citizens, Poles, Hungarians, Rumanians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Latvians. It is now also well documented that anti-Semitism in the United States and Great Britain prevented both countries from doing as much as they could have to publicize these genocidal policies or to mount a serious rescue campaign.²

The blatant racism of the Nazis had a twofold impact in the anti-Axis camp. On the one hand, it provoked a sustained critique of “master-race” arguments in general, with a wide range of Western scientists and intellectuals lending the weight of their reputations to the repudiation of pseudoscientific theories concerning the inherently superior or inferior capabilities of different races. At the same time, this critique of Nazi

racism had a double edge, for it exposed the hypocrisy of the Western Allies. Anti-Semitism was but one manifestation of the racism that existed at all levels in the United States and the United Kingdom. Even while denouncing Nazi theories of "Aryan" supremacy, the U.S. government presided over a society where blacks were subjected to demeaning Jim Crow laws, segregation was imposed even in the military establishment, racial discrimination extended to the defense industries, and immigration policy was severely biased against all nonwhites. In the wake of Pearl Harbor, these anti-"colored" biases were dramatically displayed in yet another way: the summary incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese-Americans.

Such discrimination provided grist for the propaganda mills of the Axis. The Germans pointed to the status of blacks in America as proof of the validity of their dogma as well as the hollowness of Allied attacks on Nazi beliefs. The Japanese, acutely sensitive to "color" issues from an entirely different perspective, exploited every display of racial conflict in the United States in their appeals to other Asians (while necessarily ignoring the white supremacism of their German ally). Racism within the Allied camp was, however, a volatile issue in and of itself regardless of what enemy propagandists said. Although only a few individuals spoke up on behalf of the persecuted Japanese-Americans, both the oppression of blacks and the exclusion of Asian immigrants became political issues in wartime America. Blacks raised questions about "fighting for the white folks," and called for "double victory" at home and abroad. Asians, especially Chinese and Indians, decried the humiliation of being allied to a country which deemed them unfit for citizenship; and for a full year in the midst of the war, the U.S. Congress debated the issue of revising the suddenly notorious Oriental exclusion laws. In such ways, World War Two contributed immeasurably not only to a sharpened awareness of racism within the United States, but also to more radical demands and militant tactics on the part of the victims of discrimination.

This was equally true abroad, especially in Asia, where the Allied struggle against Japan exposed the racist underpinnings of the European and American colonial structure. Japan did not invade independent countries in southern Asia. It invaded colonial outposts which the Westerners had dominated for generations, taking absolutely for granted their racial and cultural superiority over their Asian subjects. Japan's belated emergence as a dominant power in Asia, culminating in the devastating "advance south" of 1941-42, challenged not just the Western presence but

the entire mystique of white supremacy on which centuries of European and American expansion had rested. This was clear to all from an early date: to the Japanese; to the imperiled European and American colonials; and, not least, to the politically, economically, and culturally subjugated peoples of Asia.³

Japan's Pan-Asiatic slogans played upon these sentiments, and the favorable response of many Asians to the initial Japanese victories against the Americans, British, and Dutch intensified Western presentiments of an all-out race war in Asia. In China, the Japanese had persuaded Wang Ching-wei, formerly a respected nationalist leader, to head their puppet government. After Pearl Harbor, Indian and Burmese patriots both formed independent nationalist armies in collaboration with the Japanese, while in Indonesia pro-Japanese sentiments were expressed by the rousing triple slogan of the so-called AAA movement: Japan the Leader of Asia, Japan the Protector of Asia, Japan the Light of Asia. In the highly publicized Assembly of the Greater East Asiatic Nations convened in Tokyo in November 1943, a succession of Asian leaders voiced support for Japan and placed the war in an East-versus-West, Oriental-versus-Occidental, and ultimately blood-versus-blood context. Thus, Burma's passionately outspoken leader Ba Maw told delegates to the conference, "My Asiatic blood has always called to other Asiatics," and declared that his dreams of Asiatic solidarity had at long last become reality. "This is not the time to think with our minds," Ba Maw exclaimed; "this is the time to think with our blood, and it is this thinking with the blood that has brought me all the way from Burma to Japan." The Burmese prime minister spoke repeatedly of the solidarity of "a thousand million Asiatics," a vision also evoked by other Asian leaders.⁴

Burma and the Philippines, long colonies of Britain and the United States respectively, were granted nominal independence by Japan in 1943. Occupied Indonesia was later also given independence, although the quick end of the war made the transfer of authority untidy. The Tokyo conference of November 1943 was designed to be an inspiring symbol of Pan-Asian idealism and the demise of white colonial rule in Asia; and although it was ultimately a hollow exercise, it fueled both Asian racial dreams and Western racial fears. Officials in the West took the rhetoric of Asian solidarity painfully to heart. During the first year of the war, for example, Admiral Ernest King worried about the repercussions of Japanese victories "among the non-white world" while Roosevelt's chief of staff Admiral William Leahy wrote in his diary about the fear that Japan

might “succeed in combining most of the Asiatic peoples against the whites.” William Phillips, Roosevelt’s personal emissary to India in 1943, sent back deeply pessimistic reports about a rising “color consciousness” that seemed to be creating an insurmountable barrier between Oriental and Occidental peoples. In March 1945, a month before he died, President Roosevelt evoked in a negative way much the same image of Pan-Asian solidarity that the Asian leaders had emphasized in Tokyo in 1943. “1,100,000,000 potential enemies,” the president told a confidant, “are dangerous.”⁵

The media in the West were frequently even more apocalyptic in their expression of such fears. Thus, the Hearst newspapers declared the war in Asia totally different from that in Europe, for Japan was a “racial menace” as well as a cultural and religious one, and if it proved victorious in the Pacific there would be “perpetual war between Oriental ideals and Occidental.” Popular writers described the war against Japan as “a holy war, a racial war of greater significance than any the world has heretofore seen.” Spokesmen for the cause of China and a free Asia like Pearl Buck and Lin Yutang were so appalled and alarmed by the way Westerners instinctively saw the fight against Japan in sweeping racial terms that they warned of a Third World War between whites and nonwhites within a generation.

In fact, Pan-Asian unity was a myth, albeit a myth that died hard for all sides. In the end, their own oppressive behavior toward other Asians earned the Japanese more hatred than support. Ba Maw, dreamer of Asian blood calling to Asian blood, eventually became a bitter, scathing critic of Japanese “brutality, arrogance, and racial pretensions”; in his disillusion, as in his dreams, he was typical. As a symbol of Asian audacity, defiance, and—fleetingly—strength vis-à-vis the West, the Japanese commanded admiration throughout Asia. As the self-designated leaders of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, however, they proved to be as overweening as the Westerners had been before them, and in many instances even more harsh: dominating the political scene, taking over local economies, imposing broad programs of “Japanization,” slapping non-Japanese in public, torturing and executing dissidents, exploiting native labor so severely that between 1942 and 1945 the death toll among such workers numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Untold millions of Asian civilians died during the brief existence of the Co-Prosperity Sphere—from fighting, atrocities, disastrous labor and economic policies, and the starvation and disease that followed the war destruction. To some critics,

this oppression reflected the fascist nature of the Japanese state. To some, it was better understood as the desperate reflex of an overly ambitious imperialist power that had arrived late on the scene. Still other critics argued that Japanese behavior betrayed a racial supremacism as virulent in its own way as the master-race theories of the Nazis.⁶

That there was a decidedly racist component to the very conception of the Co-Prosperity Sphere is indisputable. Although the Japanese government frequently admonished its officials and citizens to avoid all manifestations of racial discrimination, the operative language of the new sphere was in fact premised on the belief that the Japanese were destined to preside over a fixed hierarchy of peoples and races. An Imperial Army document from the summer of 1942, for example, divided the nationalities of Asia into “master races,” “friendly races,” and “guest races,” reserving the position of undisputed leadership for the “Yamato race.” A massive secret study prepared in the civilian bureaucracy in 1942–43 was entitled “Global Policy with the Yamato Race as Nucleus,” and expatiated upon the destiny of the Japanese as the “leading race” in Asia and implicitly the world. The Co-Prosperity Sphere, it was argued there, would contribute in both material and psychological ways to maintaining that superiority “eternally.” For the Japanese, Pan-Asianism was thus a hydra-headed ideology, involving not merely a frontal attack on the Western colonial powers and their values but also discrimination vis-à-vis the other races, nationalities, and cultures of Asia.⁷

When the struggle in Asia is taken into consideration, it becomes apparent that neither anti-Semitism nor white supremacism in its wider manifestations suffices to illuminate the full impact of racism during World War Two. In the United States and Britain, the Japanese were more hated than the Germans before as well as after Pearl Harbor. On this, there was no dispute among contemporary observers. They were perceived as a race apart, even a species apart—and an overpoweringly monolithic one at that. There was no Japanese counterpart to the “good German” in the popular consciousness of the Western Allies. At the same time, the Japanese themselves dwelled at inordinate length on their own racial and cultural superiority, and like their adversaries, who practiced discrimination while proclaiming they were “fighting for democracy,” they too became entangled in a web of contradictions: creating new colonial hierarchies while preaching liberation; singing the glories of their unique Imperial Way while professing to support a broad and all-embracing Pan-Asianism.

The racist code words and imagery that accompanied the war in Asia were often exceedingly graphic and contemptuous. The Western Allies, for example, consistently emphasized the “subhuman” nature of the Japanese, routinely turning to images of apes and vermin to convey this. With more tempered disdain, they portrayed the Japanese as inherently inferior men and women who had to be understood in terms of primitivism, childishness, and collective mental and emotional deficiency. Cartoonists, songwriters, filmmakers, war correspondents, and the mass media in general all seized on these images—and so did the social scientists and Asia experts who ventured to analyze the Japanese “national character” during the war. At a very early stage in the conflict, when the purportedly inferior Japanese swept through colonial Asia like a whirlwind and took several hundred thousand Allied prisoners, another stereotype took hold: the Japanese superman, possessed of uncanny discipline and fighting skills. Subhuman, inhuman, lesser human, superhuman—all that was lacking in the perception of the Japanese enemy was a human like oneself. An endless stream of evidence ranging from atrocities to suicidal tactics could be cited, moreover, to substantiate the belief that the Japanese were a uniquely contemptible and formidable foe who deserved no mercy and virtually demanded extermination.

The formulaic expressions and graphic visual images which the Japanese relied on to distinguish themselves from others were, on the surface, quite different. Their leaders and ideologues constantly affirmed their unique “purity” as a race and culture, and turned the war itself—and eventually mass death—into an act of individual and collective purification. Americans and Europeans existed in the wartime Japanese imagination as vivid monsters, devils, and demons; and one had only to point to the bombing of Japanese cities (or the lynching of blacks in America) to demonstrate the aptness of this metaphor. In explaining their destiny as the “leading race,” the Japanese also fell back upon theories of “proper place” which had long been used to legitimize inequitable relationships within Japan itself.

These dominant perceptions of the enemy on both the Allied and Japanese sides, intriguing in themselves, become even more interesting when it is recognized that they all existed independently of the conflict in Asia. Indeed, both the stereotypes and the explanations used to justify them really had little to do with Americans, Englishmen, Australians, Japanese, or other Asian nationalities per se. They were archetypal images associated with inequitable human relations in general, and their

roots traced back centuries on both sides. Where the Western Allies were concerned, for example, the visceral hatred of the Japanese tapped Yellow Peril sentiments that, before the turn of the century, had been directed mainly against the Chinese. The coarseness and pervasiveness of plain anti-“yellow” race hate throughout the war is as shocking in retrospect as is the popularity of simian imagery; but the Yellow Peril sentiment was itself rooted in earlier centuries. The war words and race words which so dominated the propaganda of Japan’s white enemies—the core imagery of apes, lesser men, primitives, children, madmen, and beings who possessed special powers as well—have a pedigree in Western thought that can be traced back to Aristotle, and were conspicuous in the earliest encounters of Europeans with the black peoples of Africa and the Indians of the Western Hemisphere. The Japanese, so “unique” in the rhetoric of World War Two, were actually saddled with racial stereotypes that Europeans and Americans had applied to nonwhites for centuries: during the conquest of the New World, the slave trade, the Indian wars in the United States, the agitation against Chinese immigrants in America, the colonization of Asia and Africa, the U.S. conquest of the Philippines at the turn of the century. These were stereotypes, moreover, which had been strongly reinforced by nineteenth-century Western science.

In the final analysis, in fact, these favored idioms denoting superiority and inferiority transcended race and represented formulaic expressions of Self and Other in general; and this was the case on the Japanese side as well. The Japanese found “proper place” in the Confucian classics they inherited from China, and their notions of “purity” in the rituals of the indigenous Shinto religion. Less obviously, their response to the Americans and Europeans also was strongly influenced by folk beliefs concerning strangers, outsiders, and ambiguous gods or demons whose powers could be either beneficent or destructive. During the war, the Japanese even turned one of their most beloved folk tales into a parable of Japanese destiny and a paradigm of race relations.⁸

These neglected aspects of the war in Asia do more than illuminate general patterns of racial and martial thinking. They also are a reminder of how merciless the conflict was. It was a common observation among Western war correspondents that the fighting in the Pacific was more savage than in the European theater. Kill or be killed. No quarter, no surrender. Take no prisoners. Fight to the bitter end. These were everyday words in the combat areas, and in the final year of the war such attitudes contributed to an orgy of bloodletting that neither side could conceive of

avoiding, even though by mid-1944 Japan's defeat was inevitable and plain to see. As World War Two recedes in time and scholars dig at the formal documents, it is easy to forget the visceral emotions and sheer race hate that gripped virtually all participants in the war, at home and overseas, and influenced many actions and decisions at the time. Prejudice and racial stereotypes frequently distorted both Japanese and Allied evaluations of the enemy's intentions and capabilities. Race hate fed atrocities, and atrocities in turn fanned the fires of race hate. The dehumanization of the Other contributed immeasurably to the psychological distancing that facilitates killing, not only on the battlefield but also in the plans adopted by strategists far removed from the actual scene of combat. Such dehumanization, for example, surely facilitated the decisions to make civilian populations the targets of concentrated attack, whether by conventional or nuclear weapons. In countless ways, war words and race words came together in a manner which did not just reflect the savagery of the war, but contributed to it by reinforcing the impression of a truly Manichaean struggle between completely incompatible antagonists. The natural response to such a vision was an obsession with extermination on both sides—a war without mercy.

And yet, despite this, the two sides did have things in common, including not only race hate and martial fury but also battlefield courage and dreams of peace. "Proper-place" theorizing was hardly alien to Western ways of thinking, which also viewed the world in terms of status, inequality, and a hierarchical division of labor and reward. Purity and purification through battle, so conspicuous a part of the carefully cultivated mystique of the Yamato race, were ideals frequently espoused in the West and elsewhere in Asia, where ideologues of the political left and right launched campaigns against spiritual pollution, patriots burned with ardor at the prospects of a holy war, and militarists extolled the purifying nature of life-and-death struggle.⁹ No side had a monopoly on attributing "beastliness" to the other, although the Westerners possessed a more intricate array of metaphors with which to convey this.

Even the most basic attitudes toward life and death, which many participants in the war claimed were fundamentally different among Japanese and Westerners, prove on closer scrutiny not to have been so drastically unlike. Many Japanese fighting men died instead of surrendering because they had little choice in the matter, owing not only to pressure from their own side but also to the disinterest of the Allies in taking prisoners. After the initial wave of humiliating Allied defeats and mass

surrenders, Allied fighting men also almost never surrendered voluntarily. Indeed, the kill-or-be-killed nature of combat in the Pacific soon made personal decisions about living or dying almost irrelevant for combatants on either side. It is true that Japanese commanders and ideologues attempted with considerable success to make a cult out of dying, as seen in the frenzied banzai charges of imperial land forces in certain battles and the creation of special suicide squads such as the kamikaze in the final year of the war. But Westerners also glorified those who fought to the bitter end, and in several instances Allied leaders at the highest level, including Winston Churchill and Douglas MacArthur, actually ordered their commanders never to surrender.¹⁰ Even as Americans were belittling Japanese who fought to the last man, treating them as virtually another species of being, they were cherishing their own epics of defeat such as the Alamo and the Little Bighorn. On the eve of Pearl Harbor one of Hollywood's most popular offerings was *They Died with Their Boots On*, an Errol Flynn movie commemorating Custer's last stand.

In the heat of war, such points of common ground were lost sight of and the behavior of the enemy was seen as unique and peculiarly odious, with the issue of atrocities playing an exceptionally large role in each side's perception of the other. Savage Japanese behavior in China and throughout Southeast Asia, as well as in the treatment of Allied prisoners, was offered as proof of the inherent barbarity of the enemy. In a similar way, the Japanese stimulated hatred of the Allies by publicizing grisly battlefield practices such as the collection of Japanese skulls and bones, and responded with profound self-righteousness to the terror bombing of Japanese civilians. It is conventional wisdom that in times of life-and-death struggle, ill-grounded rumors of enemy atrocities invariably flourish and arouse a feverish hatred against the foe. This is misleading, however, for in fact atrocities follow war as the jackal follows a wounded beast. The propagandistic deception often lies, not in the false claims of enemy atrocities, but in the pious depiction of such behavior as peculiar to the other side. There is room for debate over the details of alleged incidents of atrocity in the war in Asia; room for discussion about the changing definition of legitimate targets of war; room for argument concerning how new technologies of firepower and air power may have altered the meaning of atrocity in the modern world. However, just as no one can return to Custer and the Little Bighorn any more without observing how vicious the fighting was on both sides, so it is also necessary to acknowledge that atrocious behavior occurred on all sides in the Pacific War. Such acts, and

the propagandizing of them, became part of the vicious circle of war hates and race hates and contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of individuals—millions, if the civilian deaths of the Japanese as well as other Asians are counted—long after Japan's defeat was a foregone conclusion.

In these various ways, the “patterns of a race war” become like a palimpsest that continually reveals unexpected and hitherto obscured layers of experience. Centuries-old fragments of language and imagery are pulled to the surface. Harsh words are seen to be inseparable from the harshest of all acts: war and killing. What passes for empirical observation is revealed to be permeated with myth, prejudice, and wishful thinking. A category as seemingly tight as “race” is shown to overflow into categories pertaining to “others” in general.

As the war years themselves changed over into an era of peace between Japan and the Allied powers, the shrill racial rhetoric of the early 1940s revealed itself to be surprisingly adaptable. Idioms that formerly had denoted the unbridgeable gap between oneself and the enemy proved capable of serving the goals of accommodation as well. To the victors, the simian became a pet, the child a pupil, the madman a patient. In Japan, purity was now identified with peaceful rather than martial pursuits, and with the purge of corrupt militaristic and feudalistic influences rather than decadent Western bourgeois values as had been the case during the war. Victory confirmed the Allies' assumptions of superiority, while the ideology of “proper place” enabled the Japanese to adjust to being a good loser. Even the demonic Other, that most popular Japanese image of the American and British enemy, posed no obstacle to the transition from enmity to amicable relations as Japan quickly moved under the U.S. military aegis; for the archetypal demon of Japanese folklore had always had two faces, being not only a destructive presence but also a potentially protective and tutelary being.

To a conspicuous degree, the racial and racist ways of thinking which had contributed so much to the ferociousness of the war were sublimated and transformed after August 1945. The merciless struggle for control of Asia and the Pacific gave way, in a remarkably short time, to an occupation in which mercy was indeed displayed by the conquerors, and generosity and goodwill characterized many of the actions of victor and vanquished alike. That vicious racial stereotypes were transformed, however, does not mean that they were dispelled. They remained latent, capable of being revived by both sides in times of crisis and tension. In U.S.-Japan

relations, this was readily apparent by the 1980s, when rising economic tensions between the two countries prompted the resurrection of crude racial images and invectives on both sides. At the same time, many stereotyped patterns of perception which characterized American attitudes toward the hated Japanese enemy in World War Two also proved to be free-floating, and easily transferred to the new enemies of the cold war: to Soviet and Chinese Communists, the Korean foe of the early 1950s, the Vietnamese enemy of the 1960s and 1970s, and hostile "third-world" movements in general. In every instance, the code words and formulaic metaphors of race and power were evoked to distinguish between the good Self and heinous, alien Other. Even Soviet totalitarianism, one was often reminded, was Slavic and fundamentally "Asiatic."

Such persistent and predictable patterns of prejudice are only part of the picture, of course, for we do live in a world of appalling violence and cruelty, where criticism and condemnation of others often may be altogether appropriate. The issue of plain race hate will not go away, however, and the end of the cold war has simply demonstrated once again how deep and blind and murderous these racial and ethnic attachments can be. Circumstances change, but the tragic patterns of discrimination remain deep in our psyches.