



## JAPAN IN WORLD HISTORY by Morgan Pitelka

Japan is often remembered in the United States as the aggressor in the Pacific War and as the instigator of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. But in 1932, the Indian independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to his daughter from a jail cell: “Early in the twentieth century an event occurred which had a great effect on the mind of Asia. This was the defeat of Tsarist Russia by Japan. . . . I remember well how excited I used to get when news came of the Japanese victories. I was about your age then.” Nehru, who worked with Mahatma Gandhi to free India from British Colonial rule and who became the first prime minister of the newly independent nation, saw in the 1905 Japanese victory evidence that Asian peoples—indeed non-western nations—could stand up to the predatory power of Western imperialists. Japan’s victory represented what he called “a great pick-me-up for Asia”. The tension between these two visions of Japan is one potential source of interest for students and teachers alike, and threads throughout Japan’s long documented history.

Japan was lucky enough to be situated on the edge of one of the most productive civilizations in world history: China. Going back two millennia, the residents of the Japanese archipelago benefited from the flow of people, objects, and ideas from China and Korea with little fear of invasion or attack. This allowed Japanese elites to absorb and adapt Chinese writing and literature, Confucian notions of social order and governance, Buddhism, architecture, and countless other practices and traditions in multiple waves of import and trade, while still maintaining a discrete cultural identity. The distinctive cultures of premodern Japan are exciting to teach and easy to situate in global, comparative contexts, including the imperial court and its many literary and poetic works such as *The Tale of Genji*; the emergence and prominence of the samurai as military, political, and cultural leaders; and the remarkable urbanization of the early modern period, with Edo (now Tokyo) becoming the largest city in the world at the end of the seventeenth century.

Several notable moments of premodern conflict are worth teaching as well. In the late thirteenth century, the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan, having conquered China and pacified Korea, launched two successive but unsuccessful invasions of the Japanese islands. The story of poor naval planning, inclement weather, and stout Japanese samurai resistance is quite compelling, and points to Japan’s unique geographic position on the edge of the Asian continent. In the late sixteenth-century, conversely, the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, having pacified all of Japan after a century of civil war, launched his armies into the Korean peninsula in a vain attempt to conquer China. His armies, battle hardened and numbering more than 150,000 men, initially successfully swept across Korea until met by the forces of the Ming. The tales of Japan’s violent occupation of Korea, the growth of Korean resistance, and the eventual withdrawal after Hideyoshi’s death are powerful, and some have suggested the invasion was a major cause for the subsequent fall of the Ming Dynasty in China. Lastly, in the period from 1543 to 1632, European merchants and missionaries had significant contact with the Japanese before being ejected from the country by the Tokugawa, who wanted to avoid the fate of other cultures that experienced upheaval through sustained contact with European powers. Many of the Europeans’ writings about Japan are available in English translation and are useful for thinking about cultural clashes, representations of difference, and Eurocentrism.

The more recent history of Japan, from its 1868 modern revolution to the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake and Tsunami, is also illuminating when incorporated into extant curricula. Japan’s remarkably rapid industrialization and modernization effort—beginning with the Meiji Restoration and peaking, perhaps, with the aforementioned 1905 defeat of Russia—was unprecedented in world history, and an important illustration of the fact that modernity was and continues to be dispersed and diverse. American students need to know that the U.S. and Western European experiences of modernization are not the only stories worth telling. Japan’s participation in World War II is also worth examining in detail, though the story is of course a tragic one. The contrast between Japan’s wartime aspiration to be a global leader (and to rid Asia of Western interference) and its own descent into fascist totalitarianism is striking. Rather than focusing on American losses in the Pacific during the war, it is revealing to consider the Asian context. The war had incredible costs for the Japanese people on the homefront and in the colonies; even worst costs for the brutally ruled subjects of Korea and Taiwan; and long-lasting impact for all those whose countries were invaded by Japanese forces across Northeast and Southeast Asia. Also tragic was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not only for the massive loss of innocent life but for what the bombs represented: the triumph of technology over human values, and the insistence that the end justifies the means. An unanticipated consequence was the resulting conviction, still widely held in Japan, that the indignity of being the only nation ever to suffer atomic bombing makes the Japanese the victims rather than the aggressors in that terrible, global conflict.

Japan’s postwar era is equally stunning in the impact of this small archipelago on the world. Denied the right to wage war by the postwar constitution (which was written by a team of Americans), Japan devoted itself to attaining economic prosperity and to being a leader in the field of global business. Supported by the U.S. and its allies, who desperately wanted a democratic and capitalist friend in East Asia, Japan went through a period of the most rapid economic growth the world had to that point witnessed. Between 1950 and 1973, Japan’s GNP rose at an average rate of 10%, and until 2010 Japan had the second largest market economy in the world behind the United States; today it has the third largest, behind China. Japanese electronics, automobiles, and high-tech goods continue to flourish in the global market, supplemented now by Japan’s robust export of popular culture in the form of video games, animated films, toys, and other forms of popular culture.

Many have turned their attention to China and India as the new economic powerhouses of Asia, but Japan continues to be incredibly influential and relevant in the world we live in. Examining the way that Japan has managed its middling growth and social crises such as the shrinking population while still maintaining its social mores, cultural values, and sense of national identity is revealing. Likewise, looking carefully at the mismanagement of the 2011 Tōhoku Earthquake and Tsunami (and the resulting and ongoing meltdown of the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant) can serve as an object lesson for students, as they consider that nations around the world are likely to face more disasters in the decades ahead as the effects of climate change become more severe.

[1] Frank Moraes, Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 30.

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