

# The GATHERING STORM

Japan's relentless empire-building in the 1930s put the US on red alert – but could Roosevelt convince a reluctant public to stand against the Rising Sun?

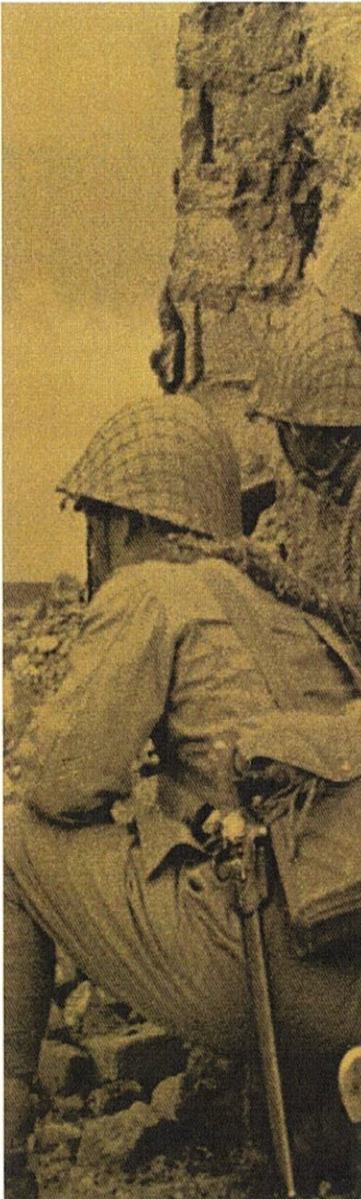
BY FRANCIS PIKE



GETTY IMAGES-THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

**GROWING PAINS**

Japanese soldiers man positions during the battles of Khalkhin Gol, an undeclared 1939 border war with the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, Tokyo was firmly set on expansion



**I**n mid-September 1931, Japanese army officers involved in a plot to annex Manchuria – a northern Chinese region long coveted by Japan – received a warning telegram from Tokyo: “PLOT EXPOSED. ACT BEFORE TATEKAWA’S ARRIVAL.” Japan’s civil government had not authorised the plot, and had sent Major General Yoshitsugu Tatekawa to prevent it. Forewarned, on the evening of 18 September, when Tatekawa’s train arrived in the city of Mukden, the army officers whisked him off to the best teahouse in town, the Literary Chrysanthemum, where Tatekawa was happily plied with tea, sake, a bed and a geisha.

At 10.20pm, with the government’s envoy otherwise engaged, the plotters exploded a small bomb next to the Japanese-controlled railway tracks near Mukden. Although it did little damage, the Japanese army swiftly accused Chinese troops of the crime and sprang into action. By noon the following day most of the junction towns on the South Manchuria Railway had been seized; the rest of the province soon followed. So began what in Japan has become known as the Fifteen-Year War, which ended only with Emperor Hirohito’s surrender, shortly after the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

The Japanese army’s Manchurian ruse fooled nobody. On 22 September 1931, the US secretary of state, Henry Stimson, cabled the League of Nations: “It is apparent that the Japanese military have initiated a widely extended movement of aggression only after careful preparation...” Unbeknownst to the world, what would come to be called the ‘Mukden Incident’ would lead inexorably towards Pearl Harbor. The Stimson Doctrine that followed – the US government’s policy of refusing to recognise states created by force – was essentially a letter to the Japanese government telling it to keep its hands



Chinese prisoners are held captive by Japanese soldiers during the war over Manchuria in 1931



The New York Times reports on the Washington Naval Conference in 1921. Japan bitterly resented the resulting treaty

off China – a country that had, until the 1820s, been Asia’s greatest power, but was now riven by civil war and threatened by Japanese and Soviet plans to dismember it.

### JAPAN’S GRIEVANCES

In January 1919, when the great powers met for the Paris Peace Conference that marked the settlement of the First World War, Japan joined the top table alongside the United States, Britain, France and Italy. Nevertheless, the Asian country still felt like an outsider.

Japan entered the negotiations with two principle aims. Firstly, it wanted a clause on racial equality inserted into

the Treaty of Versailles. This demand stemmed from the passage of a series of anti-Japanese race laws in the US, culminating in the California Alien Land Law of 1913, which banned immigrant farmers from owning land. Racist treatment of Japanese businessmen was also seen as endemic in Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai and other western imperial outposts. So strong was the feeling of racial conspiracy that Duke Aritomo Yamagata, the statesman who had modernised the Japanese army after the overthrow of the shogunate in 1868, warned that it was “extremely important... to take steps to prevent the establishment of a white alliance against the yellow people”. However, the western powers quashed the demand for a racial clause in the Versailles treaty – a decision that would feed into Japan’s ultra-nationalist narrative in years to come.

Japan’s second demand – for the permanent transfer of Germany’s imperial assets in Asia – was only slightly more successful. Having seized Germany’s Kiautschou Bay concession, a valuable 213-square-mile territory on China’s eastern seaboard, Japan was forced to

**At the Paris Peace Conference, Japan joined the top table. But the country still felt like an outsider**

GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

### CROSSING THE LINE

Japanese soldiers seize a railway during the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 - prompted by a staged bombing near the city of Mukden

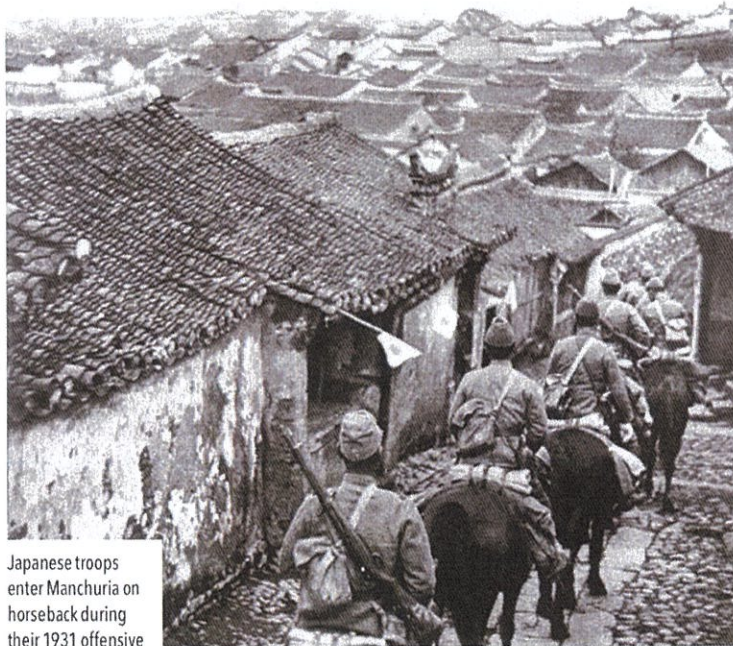


hand it back to China. As for Germany's southern Pacific empire, Japan was strongarmed into sharing the spoils with Britain and Australia.

Greater insults to Japan's national dignity soon followed at the Washington Naval Conference, which began in November 1921. The aim was to create a multilateral arms limitation treaty by restricting the building of battleships – the weapons of mass destruction of their day. The outcome, which limited the US and Britain to 525,000 tons each while Japan was restricted to 315,000 tons (a ratio of 5:5:3), did little to convince Japanese ultranationalists that the Anglo-Saxon countries were playing fair. In response to the Washington Naval Treaty, Kametaro Mitsukawa, an influential nationalist intellectual, claimed the western powers were “plotting to subjugate Asia completely by the end of the 20th century”.

### A DEMOCRACY IN RETREAT

GETTY IMAGES In spite of these setbacks, Japanese mainstream politicians continued to support the global postwar settlement, whose twin pillars were the League of



Japanese troops enter Manchuria on horseback during their 1931 offensive

Nations and the Washington Naval Treaty. However, Japan's democratic institutions, which had worked well since the overthrow of the Tokugawa feudal dictatorship in 1868, and its later replacement by the Meiji Constitution – an ill-defined mix of constitutional and absolute monarchy – were ultimately undone in the early 1930s. The Great Depression undermined Japan's

democratic constitution. Factions in the armed forces and the press took advantage of popular discontent to push their nationalist and anti-capitalist agendas. Moreover, the young Emperor Hirohito refrained from using the supreme powers given to him by the Meiji Constitution to push back against the military.

On 14 November 1930, Prime Minister Osachi Hamaguchi was shot →

## In 1932, a hit squad killed Prime Minister Inukai and targeted his house guest, Charlie Chaplin

and seriously wounded as he entered Tokyo's main railway station. His health would never recover, and he died eight months later. His attacker was a member of the ultranationalist Aikokusha ('Society of Patriots') party, one of a rash of such groups that sprung up in 1920s Japan. The prospect of an economy sliding into depression, combined with widespread hostility to the London Naval Treaty of 1930 – which renewed Japan's disparity with the west – meant that the attack elicited little public opprobrium.

Eighteen months later, on 9 February 1932, a former finance minister was gunned down by a student member of the ultranationalist Ketsumeidan ('League of Blood'). Next Baron Takuma Dan, a western-sympathising graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was murdered outside the offices of Mitsui Bank, where he was an executive. It was no coincidence that Baron Dan had just hosted the visit of the Earl of Lytton, chairman of a League of Nations committee investigating the Mukden Incident. Worse was to follow. On 15 May 1932 another anti-capitalist group, this time made up of junior naval officers, organised hit squads on eminent liberal figures. Prime Minister Inukai was

murdered at home; his house guest, Charlie Chaplin, the legendary Hollywood comic star, was also targeted, as a famous westerner. Chaplin was lucky to be out watching Sumo wrestling with Inukai's son. In a sign of Japan's increasingly nationalist mood, instead of being condemned, the assassins were popularly celebrated and given short prison sentences.

The political consequences of the assassination were far-reaching. Rather than choosing Inukai's successor from the majority Seiyūkai party, the emperor appointed a navy stalwart, Admiral Viscount Saitō Makoto, as head of a unity government. From this point on, the political parties withered into insignificance, before they were abolished in 1940 when Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe accepted their 'voluntary' liquidation and absorption into his Imperial Rule Assistance Association – an attempt to create a one-party state on the model of Germany's Nazi party.

### TIPPING POINT

Increasing opposition to liberals, capitalists and internationalists reached its apogee on 26 February 1936, when 19 young army officers launched a coup



A 1940 propaganda poster from the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, reading: 'Rise, all Japanese citizens'

d'état aimed at protecting the emperor and preserving Japan's *kokutai* ('national essence'). Their views reflected a military education based on the *Imperial Rescript for Seamen and Soldiers*, an 1882 code of ethics that all personnel were required to memorise, which promoted their mission as guardians of a 'sacred nation' and their absolute personal loyalty to the emperor. This 2,700-kanji [character] document was a potent example of brainwashing, marrying bastardised samurai values based on *bushido* ('the way of the warrior') with modern weaponry and training.

Many of the Japanese army's senior generals, also infused with the mythical cult of the god-emperor, gave tacit support to the young officers. The emperor himself, however, was furious. Unlike in 1932, the rebel officers had sought to overthrow the government itself. Hirohito ordered them to be tried, found guilty and executed. So much for the Japanese postwar myth that he was a powerless constitutional monarch.

However, instead of moving to contain the power of the army after the coup attempt, Hirohito allowed it to entrench its political position. In May 1936, the law was changed to allow only active generals and admirals to fill the post of minister of war. This seemingly minor constitutional tweak in effect gave the army and navy a veto over the formation of any Japanese government. It was a tipping point that led Japan inexorably towards a military dictatorship.

Barely a year later, Japan was at war again with China – this time for control of the whole country. The Mukden Incident, through which Japan had



Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe poses with Hitler Youth members in Karuizawa, Japan, 1938

AKG IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES-THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

### DIVIDE AND RULE

A soldier stands guard beside a Japanese flag at the Great Wall of China in 1937. Japan was given control of the wall in the Tanggu Truce of 1933



conquered Manchuria, had ended with the Tanggu Truce of 1933. The humiliating terms for China ceded not only Manchuria to Japan, but also control of the Great Wall and a 100-mile exclusion zone to its south. By 1937, gradual encroachments by Japan's Kwantung (Manchurian) army had left Beijing all but surrounded.

On the 7 July 1937, an unplanned skirmish at the Marco Polo Bridge to the south of Beijing initiated all-out war between Japan and China. Major battles at Taiyuan and Shanghai were followed by the infamous Nanjing massacre, when as many as 300,000 men, women and children were murdered – a prelude to a decade of war and occupation that would cost more than 20 million Chinese lives. Aggressive international alliances were being forged. In November 1936, Japan had signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Nazi Germany as the pair sought to contain Stalin's burgeoning Soviet Union. The other eventual Axis power, Italy, would join a year later.

After 1936, the command economic model developed by the Kwantung army

in Manchuria was increasingly deployed in Japan. Through the Industrial Bank of Japan, the government directed loans to the producers of war material. Further command-economy steps were taken via the National Mobilization Law of 1938, which downgraded domestic consumption: the focus was on guns not butter. It was an economic model that followed in lockstep with the policies of National Socialism in Germany. Japan's ultranationalists, who dominated the army and navy, were now ready to embark on the creation of an economically self-sufficient 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere', aimed at curtailing western influence in the area. For Japan's leaders, its imperial project was existential, driven by a Darwinian faith in the survival of the fittest. "It is clear as day," the philosopher Kazunobu Kanokogi observed, "that if Japan fails to build an empire on the Asian continent, [as a nation] we are all doomed to destruction."

A move to a total war footing was the natural next step. In addition to war with China, Japan's fear of the Soviet Union led to the eruption of a full-scale border



A skirmish at the Marco Polo Bridge (shown here in 1945) tipped China and Japan into total war in 1937



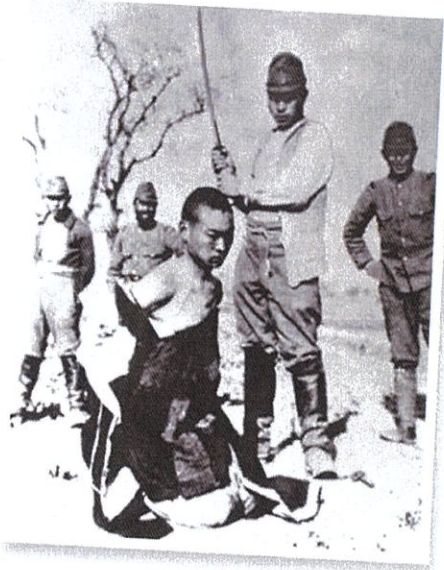
Japanese Kwantung troops in Manchuria. The region was targeted for its natural resources →

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Japanese soldiers advance on Lạng Sơn in French Indochina in September 1940



Japanese troops prepare to execute a Chinese victim during the 1938 Nanjing massacre



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A Japanese machine-gunner lies dead during the 1939 battles of Khalkhin Gol

**RED MIST**

Soldiers of the Soviet-aligned Mongolian People's Army fight to repel Japan during its border war with the USSR in 1939



conflict, culminating in a heavy defeat for Japan at the battles of Khalkhin Gol, on the Mongolian-Manchurian border. But with the northern border neutralised by the signing of a pact with the Soviets in April 1941, Japan turned its attention southwards to complete the encirclement of forces loyal to Chiang Kai-shek, nationalist leader of the Republic of China, who were holed up in the remote western city of Chongqing. Looking to cut off Chiang's sources of supply, Japanese troops occupied the north of French Indochina in September 1940.

### THE US: FROM ISOLATION TO INTERVENTION

By 1941, in a breathless decade of military conquest, Japan's empire had expanded from an area of 245,000 square miles, including Korea and Taiwan, to 1.6 million square miles, covering Indochina (today's Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) and eastern China. The number of people living under Japanese rule had tripled from 100 million to 300 million.

While Japan was tearing up the geopolitical landscape of Asia, where was America? The United States had sent a naval expedition to open up trade with Japan in the 19th century, had fought a pitched battle on Chinese soil to defend its trading rights, had conquered the Hawaiian kingdom and seized the Philippines. But in the 1930s, the world's undisputed economic superpower had gone missing.

After the First World War, the US had turned isolationist. The dominant narrative was that the Great War was a product of Europe's corrupt, undemocratic monarchies. War profiteering was also blamed. *Merchants of Death*, a bestseller in 1934, was one of the many polemic publications that turned the American public towards neutrality in international affairs. The Great Depression following the 1929 Wall Street Crash only heightened the mood of introspection. The protectionist Smoot-Hawley Act (1930), which raised tariffs on over 20,000 imported goods, confirmed the US's isolationist stance. Legendary columnist Walter Lippmann was expressing the majority view when he wrote in 1936: "The policy of the United States is to remain free and untangled." In both 1932 and 1936, President Franklin D Roosevelt (FDR) ran on an isolationist ticket. Indeed Roosevelt, as commander-



Japan's proposed *Dai Tōa Kyōeiken*, or 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere', as illustrated in a 1940 propaganda booklet for children

in-chief, presided over an armed force that was only the 18th largest in the world, with fewer soldiers than Belgium, Portugal and Switzerland.

Yet just a year after his second election victory, Roosevelt signalled a change of course. During a speech in Chicago on 5 October 1937, with Shanghai under siege and the most important US trade concession under threat, he warned: "The peace of the world is today being threatened... We are determined to

**Walter Lippmann spoke for many in writing: "The policy of the US is to remain free and untangled"**

keep out of the war, yet we cannot insure ourselves against the disastrous effects of war and the dangers of involvement."

Where Roosevelt led, popular opinion followed. Every new Japanese action weakened America's isolationist resolve: the 'rape of Nanjing', the invasion of Indochina, the strafing of the USS *Panay* on the Yangtse river. For the US public, however, it was probably the Tripartite Pact, signed by Germany, Japan and Italy

in September 1940, that did most to alarm the court of public opinion. The American people, like Roosevelt, began to fear isolation in a totalitarian world. Increasingly, FDR initiated a covert defence of the free world. The Lend-Lease Act of March 1941, though primarily designed to offer military aid to Britain, also started to fund Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist Kuomintang army's resistance to Japan.

Most importantly, the hawks in Roosevelt's administration finally managed to overcome his dovish secretary of state, Cordell Hull, who had hitherto resisted the call for meaningful sanctions against Japan. On 25 July 1941, Roosevelt froze all Japanese monetary assets held in the US, which immediately threatened Tokyo's ability to supply its war machine. Japan's cabinet board reported that "the empire will shortly be impoverished and unable to hold its own". It predicted that the stocks of 8 out of 11 vital commodities would be depleted 50 per cent or more by 1942. Most significantly, Japan was unable to buy oil from Standard Oil of California, which had previously supplied some 80 per cent of its requirements.

### THE DECISION TO ATTACK

With a dwindling supply of petroleum, Japan faced the appalling prospect of having to give up its ambitions for a 'Co-Prosperty Sphere'. In reaction to the US's financial freeze and de facto oil





**READY FOR ACTION**

The Japanese aircraft carrier *Akagi* in the summer of 1941. Japan's navy was seen as key to eliminating the US threat

embargo, on 3 September 1941, Prime Minister Konoe's cabinet convened to discuss the 'Outline Plan for the Execution of the Empire's National Policy', produced by Imperial General Headquarters, a council of top-ranking army and navy officers. Unless the western powers backed down, the cabinet resolved "... to go to war with the United States, Great Britain and the Netherlands if necessary".

The accepted strategy for combating the west was for Japan to move rapidly to secure the oil-rich Dutch East Indies and the Philippines, a US colonial dependency. The supposedly formidable British military and naval garrison at Singapore would be taken, along with commodity-rich Malaya and Burma. Meanwhile, the main body of the Japanese navy would wait for the approach of the US fleet as it sailed to relieve the Philippines – which was indeed the proposal of 'War Plan Orange', as conceived by the joint US Army and Navy Board in the 1920s. Here, at the Marshall Islands, in the western approaches of the Pacific Ocean, the Japanese navy would annihilate the US navy, just as the legendary Admiral Tōgō had decimated the Russian navy at the battle of Tsushima in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905.

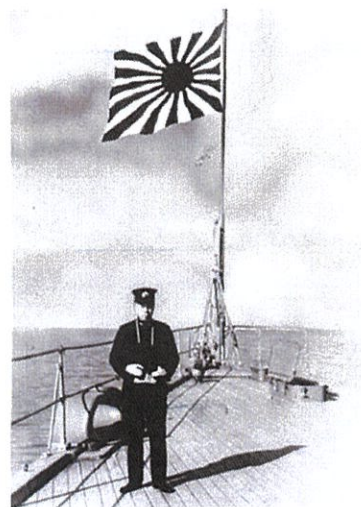
However, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who as commander-in-chief of its Combined Fleet held the pivotal role in Japan's war strategy against the United States, had other ideas. He turned conventional wisdom on its head by planning a surprise attack on the US's key Pacific naval base, located in Hawaii. By sinking America's Pacific Fleet in a surprise attack – particularly its flotilla of aircraft carriers, which Yamamoto had identified as the key sea weapons of the coming war – he would seek to delay a US naval advance. This would give time for Japan to build up defences in the Pacific islands, and secure its resource supply lines within its newly acquired south-east Asian empire. At best, Yamamoto surmised that, after the destruction of the US navy at Pearl Harbor, Washington might even offer a truce.

It was a risky strategy, opposed in Tokyo because the plan exposed Japan's six main fleet carriers to the possibility of discovery and destruction. Furthermore, the aircraft carrier was a barely tested weapons system, with only Britain's attack on the Italian navy at the battle of Taranto as an example of a carrier engagement. Yet Yamamoto was confident in the capabilities of Japan's world-class torpedo planes, and indeed the torpedoes themselves, which had been

designed in great secrecy in the interwar years to offer unparalleled speed, range and accuracy. Faced with continued opposition from his colleagues in Tokyo, Yamamoto nudged the decision his way by threatening to resign.

**FINAL TALKS FALTER**

As tensions rose with the US, on 27 November 1940 Japan sent former foreign minister Admiral Kichisaburō Nomura to Washington as ambassador. He was tasked with negotiating a lasting peace.



Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who advocated a surprise attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor

COURTESY OF THE NAVAL HISTORY & HERITAGE COMMAND-NH 73059/TOFFOTO



Japanese diplomat Saburō Kurusu (standing) and Adolf Hitler (right) at the signing of the Tripartite Pact in Berlin, 1940

Ultrationalist Hideki Tojo, then war minister, bows to Hirohito at an imperial ceremony in October 1940



When the bellicose Tojo was appointed prime minister in 1941, the prospect of peace receded

## FDR knew war was inevitable. From detected troop movements, south-east Asia was the assumed target

In line with the Stimson Doctrine, the US demanded 'open-door' trade, with no regime change in Asia except through peaceful means and no interference in the affairs of other nations. These already tough conditions were stiffened further with American insistence, after the Tripartite Pact, that Japan should break ties with Hitler. The chances of a diplomatic breakthrough became even more remote in July 1941, when Japan signed the 'Protocol Concerning Joint Defence and Joint Military Cooperation' with France's collaborationist Vichy government, which effectively ceded control of French Indochina to Tokyo.

Japan's suspicion was that the US was playing for time while Roosevelt, having loosened Congress's purse strings, set about rebuilding US military capability. And all the while, Japan's stockpiles of raw materials – particularly oil – were running down. With the Japanese cabinet

demanding the US and its western allies back down on its assets freeze, the scope for compromise was limited. When Emperor Hirohito's counsellors advised him to choose the bellicose General Hideki Tojo as prime minister on 17 October 1941, the path to peace became vanishingly narrow. Tojo was an ultrationalist, who had asserted in an essay published in 1934 that Japan must "spread [its own] moral principles to the world, [for] the cultural and ideological warfare of the 'Imperial Way' is about to begin".

At the imperial conference on 5 November, Hirohito approved Yamamoto's plan of attack. The following day, Ambassador Nomura presented Washington with final concessions, known as Proposal A, for a partial withdrawal of Japanese troops from China. The US rejected this offer, having learned from their codebreaking

intercepts that another proposal would follow. On the 20 November, Japan's Proposal B offered withdrawal from southern Indochina if the US would unfreeze Japan's assets and refrain from supplying Chiang Kai-shek's armies in China. Both proposals were declined. Aware from intercepts on 26 November that Japan would launch an attack sometime after 29 November, Roosevelt knew that war was all but inevitable. From detected troop movements, the assumption was that the target would be somewhere in south-east Asia, though there were uncertainties about the whereabouts of Yamamoto's Combined Fleet. In fact, it was hiding under radio silence in the remote Kuril Islands, at the northernmost tip of Japan.

In the meantime, with nothing further to gain from negotiations, Cordell Hull, the US secretary of state, presented Ambassador Nomura with a 10-point ultimatum, including the demand that Japan withdraw from all of China and Indochina. Faced with utter defeat and humiliation if he accepted the American terms, Hirohito, at a conference with General Tojo on 1 December 1941, gave the final sanction for simultaneous attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines and British Malaya. Japan's invasion of China, which had started with the Mukden Incident in 1931, had become the *casus belli* that had launched Japan into war with the world's greatest empire, Britain, and the world's most powerful nation: the United States. ●

# THE ROAD TO PEARL HARBOR

The crucial Second World War events in the lead-up to Japan's surprise attack

BY NIGEL JONES



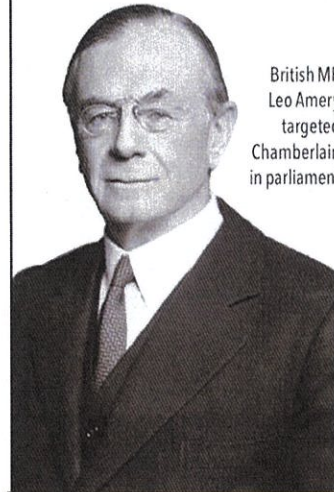
Britain's declaration of war on Germany being read in London

## 3 September 1939

Britain and France, fulfilling a guarantee to Poland, **declare war on Germany** after the expiry of an ultimatum demanding withdrawal is ignored by Hitler. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain broadcasts the declaration of war on BBC radio. His announcement coincides with the war's first air-raid warning - a false alarm.

## 7 May 1940

The British parliament debates the Norway fiasco. A series of speeches attacking the government's conduct of the campaign climaxes with Conservative politician Leo Amery's **demand for Chamberlain to "in the name of God - go!"** The government majority is severely reduced by a Tory rebellion.



British MP Leo Amery targeted Chamberlain in parliament

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## 1 September 1939

**Nazi Germany invades Poland.** In a lightning six-week "Blitzkrieg" campaign the country is conquered and its capital, Warsaw, is bombed and reduced to rubble. In a prearranged plan, **Stalin's Soviet Union occupies eastern Poland** and the two totalitarian powers divide the country between them.

German troops in dinghies during their Norwegian campaign



Wehrmacht soldiers cross and occupy the Polish border at Sopot

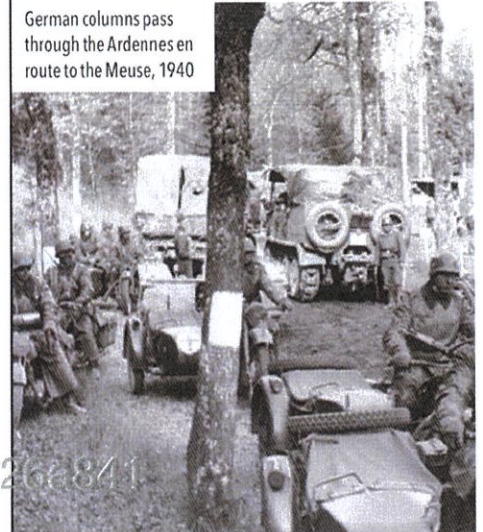
## 9 April 1940

**Germany invades Norway and Denmark.** Denmark is subdued within hours, but Norway fiercely resists sea and air landings. British and French troops land in Norwegian ports, but withdraw after a badly bungled campaign. The German navy suffers severe losses, which later will hamper its ability to invade Britain.

## 10 May 1940

**Germany attacks France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.** In another Blitzkrieg campaign, combined German air and armour assaults rapidly penetrate French defences. German spearheads cross the river Meuse and threaten to divide the British and French armies.

German columns pass through the Ardennes en route to the Meuse, 1940



### 26 May 1940

After German columns reach the coast of the English Channel, splitting the Allied armies in two, Operation Dynamo starts to **evacuate British, French and Belgian troops from the port of Dunkirk**. Some 340,000 men are rescued by the navy and an armada of small ships, leaving most of the equipment behind.

Allied forces wait to be evacuated from the dunes at Dunkirk



High-ranking Nazis, including Göring, Hess and Hitler, confer at the signing of the French-German armistice

### 22 June 1940

France signs an armistice with Hitler in a humiliating ceremony in a railway carriage at the site of the 1918 armistice ending the First World War. The country is divided into a German-occupied northern zone, including Paris, and the puppet Vichy state, ruled by Pétain under Nazi control.

### 10 May 1940

Following Germany's attack on the Low Countries, Chamberlain resigns after the opposition Labour party refuses to serve under him in a new national government. The belligerent veteran statesman **Winston Churchill becomes prime minister**, with a remit to win the war at all costs. He makes flying trips to France in a vain bid to stiffen collapsing French resistance.

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Civilians attempt to flee Paris by rail ahead of the advancing German army



### 3 July 1940

Churchill orders **British warships to attack the French fleet** at Mers El Kébir in Algeria, sinking several vessels to stop them falling into German hands. More than a thousand French sailors die. French ships in other ports are seized. The ruthless action impresses the Americans with British determination to fight on.



A French sailor drowns at Mers El Kébir in this Nazi occupation poster

### 14 June 1940

**Paris falls to German invaders** without resistance as much of the civilian population flees. French premier Paul Reynaud resigns and is succeeded by the aged defeatist Marshal Philippe Pétain, who opens peace negotiations with the Germans. The same week, Italy declares war on Britain and France.



**7 September 1940**

The Luftwaffe switches the main weight of its air assault to bombing Britain's cities and ports. **The Blitz inflicts huge damage** and kills up to 50,000, but fails to break morale. British stoicism under fire, reported by US journalists, attracts American admiration and sympathy.



Young Londoners peer out from a cycle shop damaged in the Blitz



The flags of the Tripartite Pact nations hang above a park in Tokyo in 1940

**27 September 1940**

Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and imperial Japan **sign the Tripartite Pact**, committing the three Axis powers to a military alliance. The pact gives Japan's military leadership the green light for its coming attack on the US and the British empire in the far east.

**11 March 1941**

President **Roosevelt signs the Lend-Lease Act**, which authorises the US to transfer oil, food and weaponry to any country deemed to be defending American interests. It marks a decisive step towards US support for the Allies.

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**10 July 1940**

German warplanes attack military airfields in southern England after Churchill rejects Hitler's peace overtures. **The Battle of Britain begins**, in which "the Few" - the young pilots of RAF Fighter Command - defeat the Nazi Luftwaffe's sustained attempt to cripple Britain's air defences ahead of a projected invasion.



**5 November 1940**

The Democrat **Franklin D Roosevelt (pictured left) is elected as US president** for an unprecedented third term in a landslide win over Wendell Willkie. Roosevelt's triumph is a victory over isolationist "America First" factions, and seen as ensuring US backing for the Allied cause.



**9 December 1940**

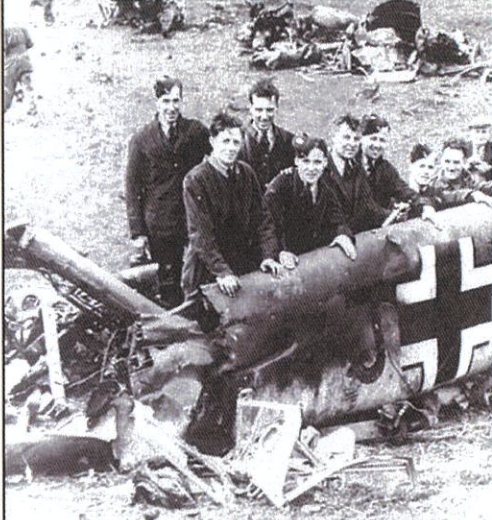
After the Italian 10th army invades Egypt, the British mount a counterattack, retaking the port of Sidi Barrani and **capturing 40,000 Italian soldiers** for the loss of under 700 men. As a result, Hitler sends the Afrika Korps under General Erwin Rommel to north Africa to prop up his failing Italian ally.



RAF Fighter Command pilots rest beside their Hurricanes in July 1940

**10 May 1941**

In London, the chamber of the **House of Commons is destroyed** in the last major German raid of the Blitz. On the same day, Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, is captured after an abortive one-man 'peace flight' to Scotland.



The debris of Hess's Messerschmitt from his lone flight to Scotland

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German troops advance through the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa

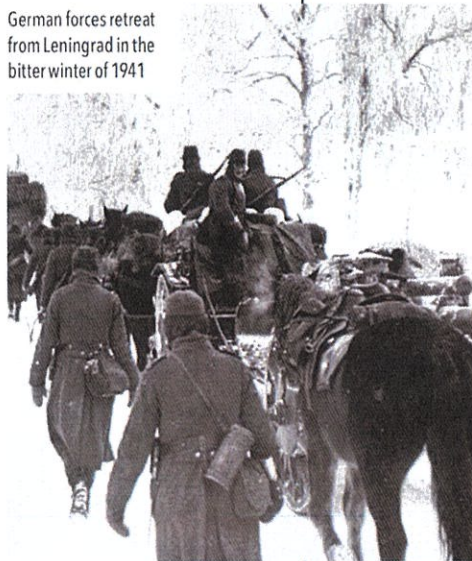
**22 June 1941**

**Germany and its allies invade the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa.** The surprise attack destroys much of the Soviet Air Forces and captures hundreds of thousands of prisoners. Churchill immediately offers support to Stalin as three massive Nazi army groups drive deep into the Soviet heartland.

**6 April 1941**

A pro-British coup in Belgrade incites **Hitler to invade the Balkans.** His troops occupy Yugoslavia, Greece and Crete. Though successful, the operation stretches Nazi resources in battling partisan resistance and delays the invasion of the Soviet Union.

German forces retreat from Leningrad in the bitter winter of 1941



**6 December 1941**

After months of rising tensions between Japan and the US in the Pacific, Japanese pilots make the final preparations for a devastating surprise **attack on the US fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.** ●



Yugoslavians in Belgrade wait to see King Peter II before he goes into exile following the Nazi invasion

**2 December 1941**

Having besieged Leningrad, **the invading Germans reach the outer suburbs of Moscow.** But the arrival of the severe Russian winter freezes armour and stops the invasion in its tracks, allowing the Russians to regroup and launch a counter-offensive, driving the Germans back.