

## **Chapter 3 - The Greater East Asia Conference and the Dream of Racial Equality**

### **The abolition of the humiliating unequal treaties**

At the beginning of 1942, the year following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the majority of the world was still under white colonial rule.

Race was the primary factor dividing humanity into those who ruled and those who were ruled. A person's value was determined by the color of his skin.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, as Japan was opening up to the world following a prolonged period of isolation, the Japanese people had two great aspirations.

The first of these was the abolition of the unequal treaties. In 1853, US Commodore Matthew C. Perry's fleet forced its way into Tokyo Bay, and Perry ordered that Japan's ruling Tokugawa shogunate comply with his demands. Japan was compelled to sign humiliating unequal treaties with the United States and a variety of European nations.

In accordance with the unequal treaties, foreign troops were stationed at "open ports" throughout Japan including Yokohama and Kobe. The Western powers controlled exports and imports, set tariff rates, and established their own courts. Japan had no right to put any white man on trial. Thus, Japan was virtually a vassal state.

Today, when court banquets are held at the Imperial Palace for guests visiting from foreign nations, French food is served.

And yet, in China, foreign dignitaries are served Chinese food, just as in Korea they are served Korean food, in Thailand they are served Thai food, and in India they are served Indian food.

So why is it that Japan adopted French cooking?

At the start of the Meiji period (1868-1912), when Japan was still groaning under the weight of the unequal treaties imposed by Western nations, it was thought that Western civilization was the only true civilization, and that all other cultures were uncivilized. In order to revise the unequal treaties, Japan had to prove that it was a civilized nation by learning the customs, lifestyles, and the advanced civilization of the West.

For this reason, Japan constructed Rokumei Hall, which today stands beside the Imperial Hotel in front of Tokyo's Hibiya Park. During the Meiji period high-ranking Japanese officials, along with their wives and daughters, dressed in Western clothing and invited

foreign dignitaries residing in Tokyo to Rokumei Hall for Western-style banquets and costume balls.

Today, black clothing is always worn at Japanese funerals, but until the start of the Meiji period, white clothing was the accepted norm. The Meiji government issued a nationwide notice asking citizens to wear black clothing at funerals because Western nations would view white clothing at funerals as being a mark of an uncivilized society.

Official orders remain in effect across Japan, issued by the Ministry of Education at the beginning of the Meiji period, which ban girls' school students from urinating outdoors the way that men do.

It is not customary in either Korea or China for women to urinate outdoors. I spent my youth in Nagano Prefecture and used to see women urinate in the rice and vegetable fields. When I visited the island of Java in Indonesia, I saw a woman urinating while standing on a footpath between two rice paddies. That, together with the smell of rice wafting through the air, filled me with a surprising feeling of nostalgia.

### **A proposal for racial equality spurned by the white powers**

The Japanese people's other great aspiration was to build a world based on the principle of racial equality.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, many Japanese samurai visited Europe and the United States, and during their travels they were angered to see the way that white-skinned people exploited their fellow colored citizens, as if they were work animals or slaves.

The last unequal treaty was finally abolished following Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War. The Japanese succeeded at becoming the only nonwhite race to join the Great Powers club, which up to then had been restricted only to whites. Now that Japan was a great power, discrimination based on race could no longer continue.

From then on, the Japanese people never gave up their dream of global racial equality. Japan repeatedly pleaded for the abolition of racial discrimination, only to be turned down by the United States and the European powers.

In 1919, when the Charter of the League of Nations was being drafted at the Versailles Peace Conference convened in Paris after World War I, the Japanese plenipotentiaries proposed the inclusion of the principle of racial equality. The people of Japan were devastated when this proposal was killed due to opposition from the white colonial powers, including the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands.

Smaller European nations like Serbia had cast their votes in support of Japan's proposal, but just when it had been adopted by majority vote, the chairman of the conference, US President Woodrow Wilson, vetoed it, for the bizarre reason that "Such a significant

measure should require unanimity." At the time, the United States held the Philippines as a colony and discriminated against its own African-American population.

The invasion of Africa by European powers was ongoing at the time, and lasted well into the twentieth century.

In 1900, Great Britain conquered Kumasi, the capital of the West African Ashanti Empire (in modern-day Ghana), and then in 1903 conquered the Sokoto Caliphate in northwestern Nigeria. In addition, France subjugated Morocco in 1912, and the next year Great Britain assumed control of Egypt.

In 1935, Italy invaded the Kingdom of Ethiopia, an independent African nation with over 2,000 years of history and reputed to have been the world's oldest kingdom. The Ethiopian Army, armed with spears and axes, fought boldly but was no match for the Italians. The following year, the king fled into exile in London, and Ethiopia was incorporated into Italy.

During and before World War II, the people of Asia, African-Americans, and the aboriginal peoples of Australia and New Zealand all looked up to Japan as a shining beacon. The many memoirs and recollections recorded during this time provide ample testimony of how greatly they longed for Japanese victory against the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.

From Asia to Africa and the Americas, the colored peoples of the world had had their dignity as human beings robbed for hundreds of years by a world order dominated by whites--until Japan's participation in World War II.

### **The Japanese Army, the beacon of hope for the nonwhite people of the world**

The Japanese Army made spectacular advances in the early stages of the war.

Upon the outbreak of the war in 1941, the Japanese Army immediately captured Hong Kong, Great Britain's "Pearl of the Orient," and by May 1942, occupied in succession the British colonies of Malaya, Singapore, and Burma, Dutch-ruled Indonesia, and US-ruled Philippines.

The peoples who were degraded due to the color of their skin and who had been forced into misery were freed from their chains by Japan, and finally given new hope for the future.

The leaders of the United States, the British Empire, Australia, and other white nations were taken aback by this mass awakening of the oppressed colored peoples of the world. They greatly intensified their crackdown on activists, but at the same time, panic compelled them to mitigate some of their racist practices in the hopes of placating other colored people.

For white people, the Japanese Army's campaign was a truly staggering event that shattered their centuries-long domination of the world.

By contrast, the Japanese saw the people of Asia as "brothers". In the territories cleared of white rule, Japanese soldiers expressed sincere sympathy for their fellow Asians and, quite unlike whites, treated them as equals.

The memoirs and recollections of contemporary Asians and African-Americans praise Japan for bravely standing up for them, whereas the Chinese of the time are seen as self-serving and sycophantic towards white nations.

Until Japan's defeat in 1945, the Westerners who ruled over Asia and Africa were called "white devils", and young people in Japan dreamed of liberating Asia from Western oppression. Such was the spirit of the times.

Everywhere Japan liberated, this spirit resonated with the local people's aspirations for independence. Independence movements rapidly gathered strength across Asia.

However, Japan's gains did not last long.

In June 1942, seven months from the start of the war, the Japanese Navy suffered a devastating defeat at the Battle of Midway and lost its main task force.

In August 1942, the United States began its counteroffensive by landing 19,000 Marines on Guadalcanal in the southwestern Pacific. Japanese army and naval landing units totaling 4,800 men were hurriedly dispatched, but they failed to retake the island. On two occasions, two Japanese divisions were committed to the fight, but they sustained heavy losses from withering American firepower and withdrew in February of the following year.

In May 1943, during the US Army's vigorous counterattack, a whole Japanese garrison fought to the death defending Attu Island in the Aleutians. In November, the US Army landed on Tarawa and Makin in the Gilbert Islands.

### **The Greater East Asia Conference: Leaders of the non-white races unite**

In October, just as the leaves of the ginkgo trees surrounding the Imperial Diet Building (now the National Diet Building) were changing color with the oncoming fall, the leaders who would attend the Greater East Asia Conference arrived in Tokyo.

As the war was about to enter its third year, the Greater East Asia Conference was convened in order to declare to the world, and to future generations, Japan's purpose in fighting the war.

The conference began on November 5 in the Imperial Diet Building. Gathered together in one room were Japanese Prime Minister Tojo Hideki, Premier of the Republic of China

Wang Jingwei, Representative of the Kingdom of Thailand Prime Minister His Majesty Wan Waithayakon, Manchukuo Prime Minister Zhang Jinghui, the President of the Philippines Jose Laurel, Prime Minister of Burma Ba Maw, and Representative of the Provisional Government of Free India Subhas Chandra Bose.

Japan had granted independence to Burma in August of that year, and to the Philippines in October.

The Greater East Asia Conference was a historic summit, bringing together the leaders of the world's nonwhite nations for the first time in human history.

Indonesia had been a colony of the Netherlands, as the Dutch East Indies, but under Japanese rule, steady progress was made to prepare Indonesia for independence. Japan developed Indonesia's educational and administrative systems and trained its future national army.

At the Greater East Asia Conference, each Asian leader delivered a speech. Wang Jingwei, in his speech, quoted the words of Sun Yat-sen, the revered founding father of the Republic of China:

Just three months before he passed away, our founding father Dr. Sun Yat-sen said, 'For a hundred years, our Asia had been invaded by Britain and the United States and entered a period of decline. Most Asian nations lost their status as independent states. However, at the moment of our darkest hour, we suddenly arrived at a turning point. This turning point was Japan's Meiji Restoration, which allowed Japan to become an Asian great power. This was the starting point of Asia's revival. Every nation in Asia must work with the great power Japan as one mind and body. We must do away with hegemonic Western civilization and, by completely driving out the invasive Anglo-American powers, complete the restoration of sovereignty to the nations of Asia.

Dr. Sun explained that, 'Japan and China are like brothers. Japan once also struggled under the shackles of the unequal treaties, but Japan was the first to throw off those shackles and become an Asian great power. Today China is seeking to abolish its unequal treaties just as Japan once was. We earnestly desire that Japan provide us with ample support in our endeavor.

In January, 1944 Japan became the first nation in the world to return its concessions to China and repeal extraterritoriality.

Jose Laurel declared that, "In fact, as I look back, Your Excellency, and recall the history of human civilization, I feel that this meeting of the peoples of Greater East Asia should have been held a long time ago. Whereas, in the past we have been kept as strangers, one and all, it is really gratifying to note that through the trying efforts of the great Empire of Japan, for the first time in history we are gathered and grouped together, never again to be separated

as in the past, ready to fight oppression, exploitation and tyranny so that we may proclaim to the world that, no longer shall the one billion peoples of Asia be subjected to domination and exploitation by a few Western Powers."

The Philippines became Spanish territory in 1571. In 1898 the United States launched a sudden attack on the Spanish colony of Cuba and, during the resulting Spanish-American War, seized the Philippines from Spain.

After ridding themselves of the Spanish, the Filipino people demanded independence and clashed with the US Army. A constituent assembly was convened which declared the independence of the Philippine Republic. Its first president was Emilio Aguinaldo, who had led the pro-independence campaign since the time of Spanish rule.

When the Japanese Army invaded the Philippines, General Aguinaldo welcomed the Japanese as liberators and worked with them.

From 1898, the Filipino Army fought against the US Army, but was ultimately defeated. The Philippines was reduced to the status of an American colony. During this period, more than 500,000 Filipino people were massacred.

Burma was invaded by Great Britain three times, in 1824, 1852, and 1885. In 1886, Burma was made a British colony.

Prime Minister Ba Maw of Burma was overcome by a surge of warm emotion when he attended the conference:

It is impossible to exaggerate the feelings which are born out of an occasion like this. For years in Burma I dreamt my Asiatic dreams. My Asiatic blood has always called to other Asiatics: In my dream, both sleeping and waking, I have always heard the voice of Asia calling to her children. Today, for the first time, I hear Asia's voice calling again, but this time not in a dream.

Before the war, it seemed that such a meeting as this would be inconceivable. It would have been impossible then for Asiatics to gather together like this. Yet now we are here. I see with my mind's eye a new world being exacted.

When we were only sixteen million Burmese, although we struggled for our birthright, it was in vain. For generations our patriots rose, led the people against the British enemy. Every revolt of ours against the enemy was mercilessly crushed. Thus, some twenty years ago in a national revolt Burmese villages went up in flames, Burmese women were massacred, Burmese patriots were imprisoned, hanged, exiled. But, although the revolt ended in defeat, the flame, the Asiatic flame, kept burning in every Burmese heart.

### **India's gratitude to Japan**

Subhas Chandra Bose is an Indian national hero.

In India he is known as "Netaji", which means "great leader". He is revered along with Gandhi and Nehru as one of the three key leaders of the Indian independence movement.

In his speech, Bose listed the major international conferences which had taken place over the span of more than a hundred years, including the Congress of Vienna following the downfall of Napoleon, the Congress of Paris after the Crimean War, the Congress of Berlin in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War, the Versailles Peace Conference after World War I, the Washington Naval Conference of 1921 to secure Anglo-American supremacy in the Pacific Ocean, and the Locarno Conference of 1925:

And as I sat listening to the proceedings of this historic Assembly, I began to wonder what the difference was between this Assembly and similar assemblies that the world's history has witnessed in bygone days.

Your Excellency, this is not a conference for dividing the spoils among the conquerors. This is not a conference for hatching a conspiracy to victimize a weak power, nor is it a conference for trying to defraud a weak neighbour. This is an Assembly of liberated nations, an Assembly that is out to create a new order in this part of the world, on the basis of the sacred principles of justice, national sovereignty, reciprocity in international relations and mutual aid and assistance.

Bose closed his speech with, "I pray to God that this Joint Declaration which this historic Assembly has unanimously adopted this afternoon may prove to be a charter for the nations of East Asia and, what is more, a charter for the suppressed nations of the whole world."

Whereas Gandhi and Nehru advocated non-violent resistance, Bose parted company with them by insisting on the path of armed revolution.

Following the outbreak of World War II in Europe, Bose evaded the tight surveillance of the British authorities and escaped India by way of Afghanistan. He then made his way to Germany where he asked for support.

In February 1943, Bose boarded a U-boat at the German port of Kiel and, after rounding the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, he transferred to a Japanese submarine off the coast of Madagascar. In May, he arrived at Sumatra and then flew to Tokyo.

After reaching Tokyo, Bose delivered an eloquent speech at Hibiya Public Hall:

About forty years ago, when I started attending elementary school, an Asian nation went to war with the world's largest imperial power, Russia. That Asian nation defeated Russia. That nation was Japan. When the news reached us, a wave of excitement spread across all India. Everywhere in India, heroic tales of the Siege of Port Arthur, the Battle of Mukden, and the Naval Battle of Tsushima caused a sensation. The children of India sincerely admired General Nogi and Marshal-Admiral Togo. My parents competed to get their hands on photos of the General and Marshal-Admiral, but were unable to.

Instead, they bought Japanese trinkets at the marketplace and decorated our home with them. This time, Japan has declared war on India's sworn enemy, Great Britain. Japan has given the Indian people a once in a lifetime opportunity for independence, and we are truly grateful for it. Japan is Asia's beacon of hope. If we pass up this opportunity, another one like it may not appear again for the next one hundred years. I am certain that victory will be ours and that India will achieve its dream of independence.

The Greater Asia Declaration was unanimously adopted. At the conference, each Asian nation agreed to honor their traditions, promote creativity, awaken cultural activity, and develop their economies under the principles of cooperation and reciprocity, as well as to "construct a morality-based order of co-existence and co-prosperity." The declaration ended with a commitment to "strengthen our friendship with all the nations of the world, abolish racial discrimination, promote worldwide cultural exchange, actively open up resources, and contribute to global progress."

### **The Greater East Asia Conference as a turning point in world history**

By gathering together the leaders of the Asian people under the banner of global racial equality, the Greater East Asia Conference was a major turning point marking the end of a long period in human history.

In August 1941, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill met aboard a ship in the Atlantic Ocean and unveiled the "Atlantic Charter". Although the Atlantic Charter airily promised to "respect the rights of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live," that pledge was only aimed at European peoples.

During the war, what Roosevelt and Churchill feared the most was that Chiang's government in China might make peace with Japan.

If Chiang's government dropped out of the war and joined Japan, then Roosevelt and Churchill's war would turn into a "race war," pitting the white race against the nonwhite races.

Consequently, the United States had no choice but to continue to pour generous amounts of financial aid and massive quantities of military supplies into China, while fully knowing that Chiang's government was entirely corrupt.

While the Japanese Army advanced south down the Malay Peninsula toward Singapore, the Fujiwara Agency, a military intelligence unit known as the "F Agency", called on Indian soldiers serving in the British Army to defect. Indian soldiers surrendered one after another and eagerly offered their services to the Japanese Army. Their numbers swelled to over 45,000 men.

After the fall of Singapore, these Indian soldiers aspired to liberate their country and formed the Indian National Army (INA).

In March 1944, the Japanese Army marched from Burma into India with the support of the INA, making their target the northeastern Indian city of Imphal.

The Japanese Army also occupied the Andaman Islands, which stretch down into the Indian Ocean. Here, Bose set up the seat of his Provisional Government of Free India with himself as prime minister.

Bose traveled from Tokyo to Singapore, where he took up command of the Indian National Army.

Bose announced the INA's campaign using the slogan *Chalo Delhi* (To Delhi!), and his troops marched while singing the stirring marching song, *Chalo, Chalo Delhi*. For them, this was a historic advance into Mother India.

The officers and men of the INA crossed the India-Burma border along with the Japanese Army and marched on Imphal while shouting the war cry, *Chalo Delhi*. Bose encouraged his men by telling them to "Raise our country's flag over the Red Fort!"

The Red Fort is an imposing castle dating from the time of the Mughal Empire (1526-1858) which is located in the old district of New Delhi. It received its name because it was constructed of red stone.

On October 28, 1956, *The Observer*, a British newspaper of record, printed an article by the world famous historian Arnold Toynbee which included the following:

"The Japanese in the Second World War made history, not for themselves, but for unintended beneficiaries and in all the countries temporarily included in the short-lived Japanese 'Co-Prosperity Sphere'... The Japanese made history by demonstrating to the rest of the human race that the Western rulers of Asian and African were not the invincible demigods that they had been deemed to be for the last two centuries."

#### **Local residents' cooperation with the Japanese Army**

Since 1945, journalist Henry S. Stokes worked, in succession, as Tokyo bureau chief for *The New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, and the *London Times*.

Stokes has written the following in praise of Japan's liberation of Asia and the crucial role played by the Greater East Asia Conference in the development of world history:

"During World War II, Japan worked to create a 'fifth column' in the Southeast Asian colonial possessions of the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. This strategy succeeded because the Japanese Army was liberating the peoples of Asia from Western imperialism and guiding them toward independence. The Japanese Army was not invading Asia in order to dominate it. Japan provided the colonized peoples of Asia with education

and military training in order to help them achieve independence. Subhas Chandra Bose, the commander of the Indian National Army who was supported by the Japanese Army, declared that 'Japan is Asia's beacon of hope' and expressed wholehearted gratitude to the Japanese. The situation was the same in Malaysia and Singapore. The reason why Japanese intelligence operations succeeded and why the British were forced to surrender is precisely because the Japanese were fighting for the just cause of liberating Asia from white rule. Today, many Japanese scholars continue to claim that the Greater East Asia Conference was a gathering of 'puppet leaders of Japanese occupied states' which was convened solely for the purposes of domestic propaganda. However, it is those Japanese who are the real puppets. They are the puppets of the victor powers who are still trying to control Japan."

A "fifth column" refers to "forces within a country who are secretly assisting the enemy". As the Japanese Army advanced, local residents eagerly aided the Japanese soldiers. Japan's "intelligence operations" involved covert espionage work.

Despite overwhelming support from native peoples, as documented in contemporary accounts written by non-Japanese people, Japan's school textbooks and dictionaries still define the Greater East Asia Conference as a "conference convened to bring together the 'puppet leaders of Japanese occupied states' for the purposes of propaganda".

In the authoritative Japanese dictionary *Kojien*, the entry on Ba Maw describes him as, "Politician and nationalist leader of Burma (now Myanmar)... When the Japanese Army invaded Burma during World War II he collaborated with the Japanese and launched a campaign against Great Britain. In August of 1943 he declared Burma's 'independence' and was installed as its national leader, but this was actually a Japanese puppet government."

The massive *Heibonsha World Encyclopedia* does not include an entry on the Greater East Asia Conference, nor does the term even appear elsewhere. There is a short entry for "Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere", but it starts with "a slogan used to justify Japan's policy of aggression towards China and Southeast Asia during World War II".

Why are Japanese dictionaries and encyclopedias propagating the *victors'* historical view?