

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour

ignited the liberation of Asia from Western domination

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Today (December 7, 2016) marks the 75th anniversary of the Japanese bombing raid on Pearl Harbour. Special ceremonies are being organized in Hawaii to commemorate the event. Many will remember the loss of their loved ones, friends and relatives. We share their grief.

On December 7, 1941, Pearl Harbour was attacked by 353 Japanese [fighter planes](#), [bombers](#), and [torpedo planes](#) in two waves, launched from six [aircraft carriers](#). All eight U.S. Navy battleships were damaged, with four sunk. The Japanese also sank or damaged three [cruisers](#), three [destroyers](#), an anti-aircraft training ship, and one [minelayer](#). 188 U.S. aircraft were destroyed; 2,403 Americans were killed and 1,178 others were wounded. Japanese losses were light: 29 aircraft and five [midget submarines](#) lost, and 64 servicemen killed.

The purpose of this article is not to embark on an inquiry to determine who was at fault and who was not. This is a complex issue with enough evidence freely accessible today to show that Japan was not totally to blame for the attack on Pearl Harbour, since it was pushed under unavoidable circumstances to enter the war with no other option left to secure oil to sustain its existence as a nation, after USA regardless of probable consequences deliberately ceased oil exports to Japan in July 1941.

Instead, what is intended here is to examine the effects of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and other western colonial possessions in Asia, on the psychology and morale of the people of Asia then mostly under western colonial domination, and ask whether Japan's anti-colonial leadership and battle success in the early phase of the War helped Asia's freedom fighters to step up their campaign for liberation from foreign occupation and achieve independence.

In the early part of the 20th century, it is undisputed that Japan was the only country in the world that stood out openly for the liberation of Asia from western colonialism and had the capacity and resources to take on the challenge. 'Asia for Asians' became a battle cry of the Japanese. No other Asian country including

China and India, took up such a Pan–Asian slogan or was placed in such militarily strong position.

On the day following the attack on Pearl Harbour, i.e. December 8, 1941, an Imperial Rescript described Japan's war aims: to ensure Japan's integrity and to remove European colonialism from and bring stability to East and Southeast Asia.

On December 08, 1941, the Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo read out the Japanese Emperor Hirohito's proclamation of war to the Empire, excerpt of which are as follows:

"It has been unavoidable and far from Our wishes that Our Empire has been brought to cross swords with America and Britain.

"Eager for the realization of their inordinate ambitions to dominate the Orient, both America and Britain, have aggravated the disturbances in East Asia. Moreover, these two powers, inducing other countries to follow suit, increased military preparations on all sides of Our Empire to challenge us. They have obstructed by every means our peaceful commerce and finally resorted to direct severance of economic relations, menacing gravely the existence of Our Empire.

"Patiently have we waited and long have we endured in the hope that Our Government might retrieve the situation in peace.

"But our adversaries, showing not the least spirit of conciliation, have unduly delayed a settlement, and in the meantime they have intensified the economic and political pressure to compel thereby Our Empire to submission.

"This turn of affairs would, if left unchecked, not only nullify Our Empire's efforts of many years for the sake of the stabilization of East Asia, but also endanger the very existence of our nation.

"The situation being such as it is Our Empire for its existence and self-defense has no other recourse but to appeal to arms and to crush every obstacle in its path."

President Roosevelt called the attack on Pearl Harbour 'a day of infamy'.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill declared that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was “a staggering blow” and “our prestige suffered with the loss of Hong Kong”. In early 1942, Churchill reassured the House of Commons amidst widespread, mass resistance to colonialism in India, that the Atlantic Charter's provisions were not “applicable to [the] Coloured Races in [the] colonial empire, and that [the phrase] ‘restoration of sovereignty, self-government and national life’...[was] applicable only to the States and the Nations of Europe’.

Japan's war policy intended a total break from Western dependence, including a rejection of bankrupt Western cultural traditions, which had been slavishly adopted since the Meiji restoration, and a return to an Asian consciousness (as opposed to Western) and civilizational values as a source for national greatness. Critical to the nation's survival in the midst of unbridled Westernization was political and cultural regeneration and a pan-Asian solidarity under Japanese leadership which was articulated as a new Order for Asia in resistance to Western imperialism.

Matsuoka Yosuke, Japanese Foreign Minister, proclaimed the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” in August 1940. The idea of decolonization under Japanese leadership resonated with Asians widely because, in the words of former U.S. President Herbert Hoover in 1942, “universally, the white man is hated by the Chinese, Malayan, Indian and Japanese alike,” due to his heartless and spiteful conduct as a colonial master over a few hundred years.

Japan’s military success in the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 fired the dreams of Asians and Africans for freedom

Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany appealed to Europe to rise above its parochial disputes to defend “your holiest possession,” Christianity and European civilization, against the rising threat of the “Yellow Peril”.

Within a decade of the German Kaiser's raising of the alarm of the danger of the “yellow peril,” Japan defeated Russia in 1905. It prompted a young Oxford lecturer, Alfred Zimmern, to put aside his lesson on Greek history to announce to his class “the most historical event which has happened, or is likely to happen, in our lifetime has happened; the victory of a non-white people over a white people.”

Japan's spectacular military victories at the beginning of the 20th century and their impact on Asian intellectuals are well documented in Pankaj Mishra's book titled, **"From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia."**

This work is a survey of Asian intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and their role in pan-Asian, pan-Islamic, and anti-colonial movements. The book begins with an electrifying moment in Asia's struggle for liberation from Western domination: the spectacular Japanese naval victory over Russia at the Battle of Tsushima in May 1905, which stunned Asians and Africans living at the time under the yoke of colonialism.

This victory of the small but resurgent Japanese navy over the imperial might of what was then accepted as a major European power fired the imagination of an entire generation of Asian leaders.

Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Gandhi, Sun Yat-Sen, Mao Zedong, the young Kemal Ataturk and nationalists in Egypt, Vietnam and many other countries welcomed Japan's decisive triumph in the Russo-Japanese War with euphoric zeal. "And they all drew the same lesson from Japan's victory," Pankaj Mishra writes. "White men, conquerors of the world, were no longer invincible."

Even Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, noted that "the reverberations of that victory have gone like a thunderclap through the whispering galleries of the East." The world wars that followed further shrunk Europe of much of what remained of its moral and political authority in Asian eyes. "In the long view, however," Mishra concludes, "it is the battle of Tsushima that seems to have struck the opening chords of the recession of the West."

Japan's defeat of Russia in 1905 was uplifting news for Asians. For the first time since the middle ages, a non-European country had vanquished a European power in a major war. And Japan's victory gave way to a hundred- and-one fantasies – of national freedom, racial dignity, or simple vengefulness – in the minds of those who had bitterly endured European occupation of their lands. Mahatma Gandhi then made an astute far reaching forecast. He remarked that "so far and wide have the roots of Japanese victory spread that we cannot now visualise all the fruit it will put forth."

Japan's proposal for equality of races at League of Nations

Japan had championed the cause of peoples under European colonial rule at the Treaty of Paris (1918–19) and the formation of the League of Nations. Japan proposed an amendment to the League's covenant that would ensure “equal and just treatment in every respect, making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality.” To their great shame, the western colonial powers rejected the notion of equality between human beings, fearing that it would become a challenge to white supremacy and the Colonial Order which suppressed non–white people. However, Japan by this proposal for recognition of equality of all, gained the esteem of Asians and Africans as the “logical leader of all coloured peoples.”

In respect to the Second World war, Jawaharlal Nehru observed;

“it became ever clearer that the western democracies were fighting not for a change but for a perpetuation of the old order, ” and both the Allied and Axis powers shared a common war interest, the preservation of white supremacy and the colonial status quo. Both sides, he noted, embraced legacies of “empire and racial discrimination,” and in affirmation after the war, “the old imperialisms still functioned....”

Japan's stunning military victories in 1941 - 1942

Thirty-six years after its victory in the Battle of Tsushima, Japan struck the greatest decisive blow ever by any non – white country or non – white people to European power in Asia with the attack on Pearl Harbour. In about 90 days, beginning on December 8, 1941, Japan overran the possessions of Britain, the US and the Netherlands in east and south-east Asia, taking the Philippines, Singapore, Malaya, Hong Kong, the Dutch East Indies, much of Siam and French Indochina, and Burma with bewildering swiftness to stand poised at the borders of India by early 1942. All over Asia, subject people cheered the Japanese advance into countries forcibly held and occupied by western colonial powers.

Days before Singapore fell to the Japanese in early 1942, the [Dutch Prime Minister-in-Exile, Pieter Gerbrandy](#), had conveyed his fears and anxieties to Churchill and other Allied leaders in the following words "Japanese injuries and insults to the White population ... would irreparably damage white prestige unless severely punished within a short time".

Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's former Prime Minister, has said “most Asians felt inferior to the European colonisers and rarely did we even consider independence a viable option.” The colonies, he explained, were structured “to serve the European demand for raw materials and natural resources,” and were thus dependencies. But Japan's expulsion of the British “changed our view of the world,” showing that “an Asian race, the Japanese” could defeat whites and with that reality dawned “ a new awakening amongst us that if we wanted to, we could be like the Japanese. We did have the ability to govern our own country and compete with the Europeans on an equal footing.” So despite the suffering under Japanese wartime occupation and the “tremendous disappointment” over the return of the British after the war, Mohamad wrote, the shackles of “mental servitude” had been broken.

Similarly, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew testified that Japan's defeat of the British “completely changed our world”.

Expressions of praise and gratitude to Japan

The Japanese with their stunning military victories over a common foe had made Asian people proud and stand erect with their heads held high.

“Britain was colonizing, enslaving Asian people before WW2. They ruled the Indian people for 180 years. It was Japan that got rid of the British from most of Asia and later all those countries gained independence.”

“Japan lost WW2 but as the consequence of Japan’s entry to war all S E Asian countries and India achieved their long hoped for independence from the Western colonial powers within 15 years after the end of the War.”

British historian Arnold Toynbee said:

“Japan put an end to West’s colonialism in Asia once and for all.”

Toynbee added “In World War II, Japanese people left a great history. Not for their own country but for countries that achieved benefit from the War. Those countries were ones that were included in the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a short-lived ideal that Japan held out. The biggest achievement Japanese people left in history is that they succeeded in displaying the fact that Westerners who dominated the world were not "Undefeatable Gods.””

Former Thai Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj Expressed his Admiration for Japan

The former Prime Minister of Thailand, *Kukrit Pramoj*, who was Chief Editor of the newspaper ‘Siam Rath’ at the time and who took office as Prime Minister in 1973, stated:

“It was thanks to Japan that all nations of Asia gained independence. For Mother Japan, it was a difficult birth which resulted in much suffering, yet her children are growing up quickly to be healthy and strong.

“Who was it that enabled the citizens of the nations of Southeast Asia to gain equal status alongside the United States and Britain today? It is because Japan, who acted like a mother to us all, carried out acts of benevolence towards us and performed feats of self-sacrifice. December 8th (1941) is the day when Mother Japan – who taught us this important lesson – laid her life on the line for us, after making a momentous decision and risking her own well-being for our sake.

“Furthermore, August 15th (1945) is the day when our beloved and revered mother was frail and ailing. Neither of these two days should ever be forgotten.”

<http://www.japanese-greatest.com/mentality-culture/animation/kukrit-pramoj.html>

Long accustomed to servility in colonial countries, western powers grossly underestimated the post-war nationalism that the Japanese had both wittingly and unwittingly unleashed. They had also severely miscalculated their own staying power among foreign subject people innately hostile to them. Despite futile counter-insurgency operations and full-scale wars, especially in Indochina, the spread of decolonisation was swift and extraordinary.

Burma, which hardly had a full blown nationalist movement before 1935, became free in 1948. The Dutch in Indonesia resisted with a rear guard defense and US and British assistance but Indonesian nationalists led by Sukarno finally overpowered them and pushed them out in 1953. Postwar chaos forced Malaya, Singapore and Vietnam into long periods of insurgencies and wars, but an ultimate European retreat was never in doubt.

Japan’s unsung role in India’s independence struggle

British governance in India — three centuries of exorbitant taxation, unfair trade practices, rampant free-marketsteering and deliberate starvation had led to the deaths of millions of Indians in preventable famines. Japan played a critical (largely unsung) role in India's struggle for independence by supporting Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and assisting him to form the Indian National Army (INA).

It is argued with vehemence by informed observers that without Bose's INA, India might never have achieved independence.

This is because, although the INA failed militarily in the Battles at Kohima and Imphal along the India–Burma border in 1944 as part of the Japanese attempted entry to India, its troops (INA) got another opportunity to challenge the British Colonial Government in a Delhi courtroom in 1945. Three INA Officers were put on trial for treason at Red Fort. This move backfired on the British. The accused a Muslim, Sikh and Hindu justified their roles as liberators of a colonized nation and won the sympathy of the Indian public.

This led to support for the defendants spreading throughout the nation — including among Indians serving in the British Indian Army. These newly radicalized troops staged strikes and mutinies across the subcontinent in 1946 against the British occupation. With its once-solid military foundation shaken to the core — and facing widespread, huge demonstrations and possible mutinies by the three forces, Army, Navy and Air Force, on a scale bigger than the Indian Mutiny in 1857 — the British authorities decided that it was time to pack up and leave. On August 15, 1947, they granted India its independence.

An unwise partition of the Indian subcontinent, which placed two new nation-states in endless conflict, marked Britain's humiliating departure from India in 1947.

"Europe," Jean-Paul Sartre claimed in his preface to Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, seemed to be "springing leaks everywhere." "In the past we made history," Sartre asserted, "and now it is being made of us."

The retreat of the West from its colonies in the East may well be said to be the singular most important event of the 20th century.

This piece it is also intended to make a plea to right a great wrong done to Japan. In other words, to call on Asian countries to shun looking at Japan as an aggressor with

criminal intent to plunder and loot other Asian countries a line pushed by massive western propaganda but to look at Japan as the real spark that ignited the fight all over Asia for independence from western domination. The time has come for fellow Asians who have benefited from Japan's massive war effort and the blood sacrifices of Japanese soldiers to concede due acknowledgement to Japan.

To single out Japan for war crimes selectively while avoiding any mention of the crimes committed by western countries in third-world countries including calling for reparations which both Germany and Japan have paid, is anything but a travesty of justice.

What is surprising and morally repugnant today is the unrepentant nostalgia for western hegemony that has not only gripped many prominent Anglo-American leaders and opinion-makers but also several servile Asian politicians, NGOs and columnists writing as cheer leaders of neo-colonialism, who strive to see Asia through the narrow angle of protecting western colonial interests, leaving unexamined the historical memory and the collective experiences of Asian peoples during the dark period of western colonial rule.

Colonialism and foreign occupation constitute crimes against humanity. They represent some of the most serious violations of national sovereignty of states and breach of international law, and in almost all colonial territories in Asia, Africa, North and South America horrendous crimes against humanity have been committed by the occupying colonial powers. The perpetrators have yet to be held accountable and brought to book under international law for these genocidal crimes.

De-colonise Asian minds and show gratitude to Japan

The challenge before fellow Asians is to de-colonise our minds and look at Japan's conduct before and during the Second World War afresh. Though Japan eventually lost the war its military effort was not in vain. It substantially weakened and demoralised the western countries then in occupation of large tracts of Asia, such as Britain, France, Netherlands, Portugal and the US, that they were forced to quit Asia in next to no time.

It is political correctness and revelations of Japan's conduct in war-related atrocities during the Second World War that prevent Japan from being given due credit for its unique contribution towards hastening the liberation of Asia from western colonial rule.

Tragically today the legacy of Japan's heroic contributions and sacrifices as the first Asian country that stood up and fought to drive out European colonialism from Asia in the 20th century, is seldom acknowledged, rarely celebrated, and hardly observed as a form of thanksgiving.

It is never too late to show Asia's gratitude to Japan and re-write the historical narrative.

Senaka Weeraratna

ABOUT THE EDITOR



The Editor, Senaka Weeraratna is an Attorney at Law. He had his early education at Royal Primary School and Royal College, Colombo.

He obtained his law degree (LL.B.) from the University of Colombo Law Faculty from where he also emerged as a popular undergraduate student leader in the early 1970s. He won a string of students' union elections, becoming initially the Secretary and in the succeeding year the President of the Law Faculty Students' Union, and subsequently he was elected by his peers in the other Faculties as the Vice - President of the Colombo University Students' Council (1972).

Upon admission to the Supreme Court as an Attorney - at - Law, Weeraratna proceeded to Australia for his post - graduate studies at Monash University where he read for his Master of Laws (LL.M.) degree. He has the distinction of authoring the first legal thesis on foreign investment in Sri Lanka, which he presented as his minor dissertation for his LL.M. degree at Monash University. It has since been published as a Book.

Weeraratna has further acquired a Diploma (Buddhist Studies) and Master of Arts (Buddhist Studies) from the Post - Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya. He has been admitted as a Barrister and Solicitor to the Supreme Courts of Victoria, and the Northern Territory.

He has held a series of appointments in Australia, where he spent nearly 20 years working in such capacities as Lecturer in law, Legal Officer (Australian Federal Special Prosecutor's Office), and Solicitor in a reputed Melbourne law firm.

On his return to Sri Lanka, Weeraratna served as an Honorary Legal Consultant on Animal Welfare Legislation to the Law Commission of Sri Lanka (2000 - 2006). He played a pivotal role in steering the drafting of the Animal Welfare Bill at the Law Commission. He has also served as Acting Director (Research) at the Government Peace Secretariat and Consultant to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRCSL).

He was a key litigant in the Noise Pollution case which resulted in a landmark judgment of the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka (2007) protecting the environment by imposing drastic restrictions on use of sound amplifiers in the public arena.

One of Senaka Weeraratna's most outstanding contributions has been in influencing radical change in the basic laws of cricket adjudication through a series of publications in some of world's leading newspapers and international cricket journals, calling for use of the Player Referral concept which he conceived and publicized worldwide finally leading to his innovation becoming accepted and used as the lynchpin of the Umpire Decision Review System (UDRS) in international cricket.

He is the Hony. Secretary and Trustee of the German Dharmaduta Society and Chapter Leader of the Dharma Voices for Animals, Colombo, Sri Lanka Chapter.

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