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# The Round Tablette

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## Welcome to the First 2021 session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

Tonight's speaker is RICHARD FRANK, author of *TOWER OF SKULLS*. He will discuss the origins of the conflict in the Pacific Theater, beginning with the Sino-Japanese conflict to events that brought the U.S. into the War in 1941.

Japan was unique among Asian powers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in not being dominated by Western powers during the great wave of Imperialism. Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan rapidly industrialized, becoming so strong that it joined the ranks of the imperialist powers expanding into China and Korea. She defeated Imperial Russia in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War and joined the Allied powers during World War I, expecting rewards once the war ended.

Relations with the Allies were poisoned when a "racial equality" clause in the League of Nations Charter and Japan's demands for Chinese territory were rejected at Versailles. Japan expected far more in the Pacific than it ultimately received. Japan's fear of an Anglo-American 'conspiracy' accelerated in 1923 after Great Britain declined to renew their alliance with Japan. Furthermore, Japan felt slighted in the Washington Naval Conference when limited in capital war ships. Japan's frustrations contributed to a growing xenophobia in Japanese society by the 1930s.

Domestically, Japan was a constitutional monarchy with the Emperor as acknowledged sovereign (but a limited political role). However, Japanese society retained many cultural attributes dating back to the Tokugawa Shogunate. Tensions between the right-wing Japanese armed forces and the civilian parliamentarians ultimately led to a wave of assassinations and violence across the country. Japan's industrial base was dependent on imported resources (coal, oil, iron, and food). Imperialists in and outside the government championed expanding the Empire to provide Japan with these resources.

Japan's ethnic homogeneity fostered growing racial chauvinism and hyper-nationalism. These attitudes were strong within the armed forces who saw themselves as the defenders of the nation above and beyond the civilian parliament. Japan's indigenous Shintoism became a personality

cult around Emperor Hirohito and the fanatical belief in the "divine destiny" of the Japanese Empire became dogma.

The rapid industrialization of Japan created serious stresses in a very traditional society. Some Japanese wanted to embrace Western Culture and adopted European dress and listened to Western music of the Jazz Age. To other Japanese, however, these foreign styles insulted what they saw as the superior and unique culture of Japan. This tension between Westernizers and supporters of Western-style democracy, and hyper-nationalists who rejected both formed a rift between the military and the government.

In the Meiji period the Samurai class had been abolished but the cultural value placed on *Bushido* (the way of the warrior) still remained. Japan's modern army and navy deliberately cultivated this medieval ethos. Many poor and lower class Japanese men saw themselves as the new 'samurai' of soldiers, sailors, or airmen. Brutally tough training and ferocious discipline helped separate the military from civilian society and gave it an exaggerated sense of its own importance. With a widely shared desire for a greater Japanese Empire, a fear of Western encirclement, national vulnerability, and racial superiority, the Japanese military assumed the predominant role in Japanese society.

With the US Stock Market crash and the coming of the worldwide Great Depression, the stresses Japan faced became critical. As world markets contracted, Japan's export based trade broke and Japan faced multiple problems: too many people; too few jobs; too little land; and insufficient domestic food production. These provided gasoline to those stoking the flames of imperial expansion through conquest.

Furthermore, the breakdown of civilian control over the military was almost complete. The armed forces and extreme nationalist factions began to intimidate the parliamentary government in an extra-constitutional manner. The army, in particular, thought, and acted, as if it were above and beyond even nominal civilian control. Korea, colonized in 1910, was ruled it with a brutal hand. The Japanese Army intended to destroy Korean culture and reduce the population to serfdom. The "success" of this cruel imperial expansion encouraged far more ambitious dreams among the radical nationalists in the 1930s. Meanwhile Japan systematically began to fortify its far flung possessions among the Pacific's coral atolls.

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**If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

The resource rich Northern Chinese territory of Manchuria was a ripe fruit easily picked. In 1931 the Japanese army (without the permission of the civilian government) rapidly occupied and began the administration of Manchuria. The Japanese promoted the diplomatic fiction of the ‘independence’ of Manchuria by renaming the territory “Manchukuo” and even grabbed the deposed Last Manchu Emperor from his opium-soaked retirement in a brothel and installed him as the “ruler” of this puppet state. In March 1933 the League of Nations censured Japan for this and she withdrew from the organization. By 1937, the Army operated virtually independently both within and without Japan.

China was in a state of internal chaos following the collapse of the Manchu dynasty in 1912, and the many competing factions, producing constant fighting between local and regional war-lords. The two main contenders were the Nationalist Chinese led by Chiang Kai-Shek which claimed (but did not exercise) sovereignty over China, and the nascent Communist Party of China led by Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-Tung). Both invoked Sun Yat-Sen and claimed his mantle.

Noting the incapacity of the Nationalist Chinese under Chiang Kai-Shek, Japanese imperialists staged the famous Marco Polo Bridge incident as a pretext for a full scale invasion of China proper. Smashing through the under-equipped, poorly supplied, and often terribly misled Nationalist Army, the Japanese waged war on China with unprecedented brutality. Foreign observers were shocked to see the terrible effectiveness of Japanese air attacks on the heavily populated cities of China. The Japanese enjoyed almost complete air superiority and had far greater combat effectiveness than the Chinese forces arrayed against them. The United States supported Chiang Kai-Shek by financing a “volunteer” group of American fighter pilots to counter the Japanese air force, the celebrated “Flying Tigers” under the command of Claire Chennault.

The Japanese proved to be among the cruelest conquerors in history with their treatment of conquered peoples. The months-long orgy of killing POWs and raping Chinese girls and women when Japanese forces took the Nationalist capital of Nanking was emblematic. In Asia, World War II definitely began in 1937 in China, where fighting on the front lines and rear-echelon atrocities continued non-stop until late 1945.

Reacting to Japanese aggression, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt imposed progressively harsher economic sanctions, culminating in an oil embargo. These moves led the Japanese military leadership to envision the conquest of all South-East Asia. The cornerstone of this plan was a knock-out blow on US Naval Forces at Pearl Harbor and

the Philippines. This decision would ultimately prove deleterious to the longevity of the Japanese Empire.

#### Further Readings:

Richard Frank, *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937 – May 1942* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020)  
Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking* (New York: Basic Books, 2012)  
Frederick Dickinson, *World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan, 1919-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013)  
Phillips O’Brien, *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance 1902 – 1922* (New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2004).  
Jun Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).  
Sidney Pash, *The Currents of War* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2014).

#### Announcements:

Vietnam War Roundtable – **TBD**  
Post-9/11 Roundtable (zoom) – **TDB** –  
World War I Roundtable (zoom) – 13 OCT. 2021 –  
All: – [rdietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org](mailto:rdietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org)  
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 21 Sept. 2021 –  
*Milliken’s Bend: Fighting for Freedom on the Mississippi* - [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)  
St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table – 23 Sept. 2021 – *Jo Shelby* - 715-386-1268 -  
[rossandhaines@comcast.net](mailto:rossandhaines@comcast.net)  
Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - TBD - [sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com](mailto:sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com)  
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 -  
<http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>  
Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 -  
[www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org)  
8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 -  
<https://www.8thmn.org>.  
Friends of Ft. Snelling - [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)  
World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 -  
<http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>  
Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show - 2022 - 320-564-6644 -  
<http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.  
Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - [www.afmsp.org](http://www.afmsp.org)  
Selim Center for Lifelong Learning, UST,  
<https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/>  
Western Naval Historical Association  
[info@wnha.net](mailto:info@wnha.net)  
Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 -  
[crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com)  
CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 -  
[www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org)

**We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

#### Round Table Schedule 2021-2022

12 Oct. Pacific Naval War  
26 Oct. Reinforcing the Philippines  
9 Nov. Deutsch Lecture – Arcadia Conference  
14 Dec. Pearl Harbor attack  
**2022**  
11 Jan. Patton: the Enigma  
8 Feb. Wake Island  
8 Mar. Nuremburg Trials – Goering  
22 Mar. Florence Finch - Filipino Heroine  
12 Apr. Doolittle Raid  
10 May Last Battle: in the Alps

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