

RACE AND WAR IN THE PACIFIC

(Pictures from History/Bridgeman Images.)

Americans fought in two distant and very different places during World War II. In Europe, Americans faced hardship and danger. But they did so amid people and places that—while foreign—had important connections with their lives back in America. Terrain, weather, place names, and sometimes ethnic ties were familiar links that provided some measure of comfort against the hardships of war.

Americans who served in the Pacific fought a very different kind of war. Whether in the jungles of New Guinea or on tiny atolls in the central Pacific, they confronted environments and cultures with fewer reference points. The more than two million Americans who went to war in the Pacific were in places as remote and far-flung as the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, and Iwo Jima. Many struggled and died in bloody battles against a determined enemy in places their families had never heard of.

The Pacific war was also marked by intense hatred. American anger about the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and Japan's belief that America wanted to cripple her economy and threatened her survival contributed to these feelings.

Race also had a role. To a greater degree than the war in Europe, the Pacific war was characterized by racial stereotyping and demonization of the enemy. The war exposed racial pride, prejudices, and anger. Propaganda on both sides reflected a strong strain of racial hatred as well as fervent patriotism, fear of the enemy, and the desire for revenge.



Deeply rooted views of Asians as inferior framed the enemy threat in racial terms in the United States and other Western countries. Even before the war began,

the media often depicted the Japanese and other Asians as animals, madmen, or childlike figures, and these views had long bolstered discriminatory policies at home and abroad. As the war progressed, American media increasingly portrayed the enemy as savage, subhuman, and bloodthirsty. The racial stereotyping was so deeply ingrained that American authorities embarked on an extensive propaganda campaign to distinguish between the “good” Asians (America's Chinese allies) and the “barbaric” Japanese. For many Americans, Japanese wartime atrocities and the fact that many Japanese soldiers chose death over surrender seemed to confirm prejudices about the subhuman and irrational nature of the enemy.

Japanese racial attitudes also influenced their conduct during the war. Japanese warriors were indoctrinated from youth to embrace a militaristic code that exalted dying for the emperor and Japanese racial superiority, while emphasizing the shameful nature of surrender. In China and elsewhere, Japanese forces often subjected non-Japanese peoples, soldiers and civilians alike, to barbaric treatment. The Japanese also played on resentment of Western colonization throughout Asia to portray themselves as liberators bent on creating a new, prosperous Asia free from Western control. Japanese propaganda depicted Americans and Europeans as beasts, vermin, or demons that threatened Japanese civilization and had to be destroyed.

ONLINE RESOURCES

ww2classroom.org

-  **Gallery of American and Japanese Propaganda Images**
-  **China-Burma-India Theater Video**

AMERICA VIEWS THE ENEMY

Racial prejudice toward the Japanese appeared in wartime films, magazines, cartoons, and posters. The Japanese were often portrayed as animals—monkeys and apes most commonly. They also appeared as madmen or small, yellow, bucktoothed characters. Seemingly contradictory concepts appeared at times. The bloodthirsty beast existed alongside childlike figures. But the images shared the perception of the enemy as lesser humans.

American propaganda also attacked the other Axis powers, but with a different emphasis. In Europe, Americans saw themselves fighting the “Nazis” or “fascism.” In the Pacific, their opponent was the Japanese people, or the “Japs” in the common parlance of the time. Hatred of the Japanese as a people often reflected racial prejudice and led to depictions of them as a race or even a species apart. Some historians and wartime observers have also argued that these attitudes facilitated the mass killing of Japanese soldiers and civilians. Others, meanwhile, have questioned the extent to which anti-Japanese sentiment influenced American actions or reflected widely held racist attitudes.

The Japanese were aware of the role race played in American society. They used evidence of American racism to convince other Far East nations that Japan was fighting to liberate all Asians from “white oppression.” In the end, however, Japan’s prejudice toward its Asian neighbors and its brutal behavior in conquered territories dispelled that myth.

JAPAN VIEWS THE ENEMY

The depiction of Westerners in Japanese propaganda was deeply influenced by the self-image held by the Japanese. They were taught that they belonged to a uniquely spiritual and physically pure “*Yamato* race” destined to emancipate Asia from Western domination and lead the world along the path of virtue. They were the “leading race,” and the war was presented as an act of individual and collective purification.

If the Japanese were pure and moral, Americans and other Westerners were seen as materialistic, individualistic, and greedy. They were often portrayed as beasts, demons, and deranged or degenerate humans.

“It was a war waged without mercy.”

Howard N. McLaughlin Jr., 5th Marine Division

These demonic and beastly outsiders imperiled the sacred Japanese homeland and had to be utterly destroyed, even exterminated. This view of the enemy was influenced by folk beliefs depicting outsiders as ambiguous gods or demons who could be forces for both good or evil. Claws, fangs, horns, and animal hindquarters were often used to depict the Western beasts. The use of animal caricatures was almost entirely random but tended to be highly personalized; often creatures representing the enemy bore the face of Western leaders. They were brutes wearing the mask of humanity.

During World War II, Japan’s military leaders also twisted the nation’s ancient warrior code of ***Bushido***, which viewed death as more honorable than surrender, to justify mistreatment of enemy prisoners. In addition to indoctrinating soldiers to believe that the Japanese were members of a superior race, the regime that came to power in the 1930s instructed them that those who surrendered were lesser beings deserving of abuse. Japanese soldiers acted on this training, and their mistreatment of Allied prisoners reinforced the hatred felt on both sides.



In this poster produced by the Japanese government around 1943, the A, B, C, and D stand for Americans, British, Chinese, and Dutch, who were often referred to as the ABCD Powers. (Image: Japanese leaflet, 1943.)