The Fifteen Year War, 1931-1945: Promoting the National Agenda Through Censorship and Propaganda

By About Japan Editors

Grade Level
Secondary

Background Information.

Early in the American Occupation of Japan (1945-1952), American media censors insisted that the Japanese refer to the war not as the Great East Asia War (*Dai Tôa Sensô*), as the Japanese had always referred to the conflict, but as the Pacific War (*Taiheiyô Sensô*). This act of linguistic imperialism shifted the focus of the war away from Southeast Asia and East Asia, where much of the fighting actually took place and where much of the Japanese brutality and killing actually occurred, to the Pacific Theater and the United States. It is important to remember, however, that for the Japanese the war did not begin with the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, but rather with the Manchurian Incident on September 18, 1931. The Manchurian Incident was an attempt by the Japanese Kwantung Army stationed in Manchuria to force the Tokyo government to become more actively involved in the region. Colonel Ishiwara Kanji, the Kwantung Army's operations officer from 1929-1932, was the mastermind of the incident, which basically entailed blowing up some southern Manchurian railway tracks near Mukden, blaming it on the Chinese, and pouring Japanese troupes into the region to secure it. The plan went off pretty much as Ishiwara had envisioned it. Despite world condemnations, Tokyo covered for the Kwantung army and set about turning Manchuria into the puppet state of Manchukuo. From 1931 on, Japan was continually engaged in some sort of combat on the mainland of East Asia. On July 7, 1937, the conflict became even bloodier and more intense after some shots were fired near the Marco Polo Bridge just south of Beijing. The shots triggered full scale war in China. In short order, Japan was able to gain control of most of the major cities and many of the train lines between the cities, but even with over 600,000 troops it was unable to secure the countryside. As Japan sunk deeper into the quagmire of China, it found itself increasingly isolated in the world. America, Britain, China, and the Dutch put pressure on her, in what is know as the ABCD encirclement. Sales of certain commodities, like iron and oil were cut off. Facing the option of submitting to American demands of pulling out of China or having its oil supply cut off, Japan launched a surprise attack against the United States at Pearl Harbor. The idea was to knock America out and to secure much needed resources in South East Asia. In the end, Japan's attempts to get out of the hole it was in by making it bigger only failed. Japan surrendered to the allied forces aboard the U.S.S. Missouri on September 2, 1945.

Shortly after the Manchurian Incident the *Bunraku* theater staged some modern plays with puppets in contemporary military uniforms, but they were not very successful and despite receiving some government subsidies the theater struggled to survive. During the war the government supported Noh because it viewed Noh as possessing a pure Japanese character unsullied by Western influence. New patriotic plays were staged that enjoyed a brief period of popularity. The authorities also encouraged kabuki and *shinpa*, new school, producers to stage war plays and historical plays (*jidaimono*) that would

invigorate the population and would support the war effort. They both obliged. Kabuki staged well-known classics that played to full-houses well into 1944. Although the government was concerned about some forms of theater it also believed that theater could provide solace and comfort to the people amidst their wartime sacrifices. By the end of the war virtually all of Japan's major theaters had been destroyed by American bombing.

Throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, as tensions between America and Japan increased, domestic censorship and cultural control tightened. Anything the government perceived to be harmful to "public safety" or "public morality" was banned. Thus, the government tried to eradicate Western cultural influences from Japanese society. This proved rather difficult since so much Western culture had been assimilated into Japanese culture. The government prohibited the use of English words in baseball and banned all "enemy music" such as jazz, though people continued to listen to it. The government forbid kabuki and *shinpa* theater companies from staging domestic plays (*sewamono*) and love plays (*tsuyamono*), lest they spoil the martial atmosphere. Similarly, the government prohibited rakugo storytellers from telling over 50 classical stories, many about the pleasure quarters. *Shingeki*, modern theater, which was dominated by leftists in the 1920s, was severely suppressed and a number of members of various *shingeki* troupes were arrested. The government also took down the names and addresses of audience members who attended suspect plays. The government outlawed the showing of American and British films. German and French films were allowed, as long as the love scenes were cut out.

In many ways the Japanese motion picture industry became subservient to national policy as the government only allowed films which supported its agenda to be produced. The government even went so far as to stipulate in the 1939 Motion Picture Law that the government had the right to force exhibitors to show "culture films," or films that benefit public education. In other words, films that promoted the war effort. The Japanese produced a number of propaganda films. As Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie note, while American filmmakers tended to caricature the Japanese enemy as "squat lustful yellow dwarfs," Japanese films usually depicted the American and British enemy as human beings (Anderson and Richie, 134-135). In *War Without Mercy*, John Dower sees similar differences in the printed propaganda created by Americans and Japanese.