The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 398
"An Incontrovertible Fact"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The main barrier between East and West today is that the white man is not willing to give up his superiority and the colored man is no longer willing to endure his inferiority…The white man is a century behind the colored man. The white man is still thinking in terms of colonies and colonial government. The colored man knows that colonies and colonial-mindedness are anachronisms. The colonial way is over, whether the white man knows it or not...The man of Asia today is not a colonial and he has made up his mind he will never be a colonial again…

In short, if the white man does not now save himself by discovering that all men are really born free and equal, he may not be able to save himself at all. For the colored man is going to insist on that human equality and that freedom.

Pearl Buck, writing in *The New York Times Magazine*, May 1942.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 398. An Incontrovertible Fact.

Last time, I ended the episode by describing to you Operation Vengeance, the American attack that led to the killing of Japanese admiral Yamamoto Isoroku on April 18, 1943.

The death of Yamamoto came as a shock to the Japanese. The news was not made public until May 21, the day Yamamoto's ashes arrived in Japan. By then the Japanese public was also having to absorb the news that the Americans and Canadians had landed on the Aleutian island of Attu. That island had been seized a year earlier, at the same time as the Battle of Midway.

The Japanese had meant to use Attu primarily for defense against a possible air attack on the Home Islands from Alaska. For the United States and Canada, however, the capture of Attu seemed a clear warning of a pending land invasion somewhere along the west coast of North America. Japanese submarines occasionally shelled coastal positions in California, Oregon, and

British Columbia. These attacks were not significant militarily, but they heightened these fears of an invasion. Those fears in turn were part of what moved the US and Canadian governments to relocate ethnic Japanese residents of their west coasts.

The weather on Attu and nearby islands is forbidding. It is very cold of course, but also very wet. Attu is a rugged island shrouded in almost perpetual rain and fog, making it a difficult place from which to carry out military operations. Summers are short, and the Allies had to wait until May 1943 to contemplate any ground action.

In the meanwhile, the Americans built air bases on nearby islands and American and Canadian warplanes repeatedly attacked the Japanese on Attu and Kiska by air as best they could. Japanese and American submarines and destroyers hunted each other in the waters around the islands. In February 1943, the US Navy put together a force of destroyers and cruisers to block Japanese supply shipments to the islands.

By March 1943, the Japanese suspended resupply by surface ship and relied on submarines to get supplies to the islands. On May 11, 1943, a force of 15,000 US Army soldiers, from elements of the US Seventh Infantry Division, landed on the island. The 2,500 or so Japanese soldiers chose not to contest the landings, but they defended their positions fiercely, as was typical for the Japanese.

On May 21, ten days after the landings, with ground combat still raging, the Japanese Navy put together a carrier task force intended to sail to the defense of Attu, but the island fell too soon. On May 29, after the Japanese were forced back into a small enclave on the coast of the island and with their supplies dwindling, their commander ordered a suicide charge into the enemy lines, what the Americans called a “banzai attack.” The Japanese lost over 2,300 soldiers to the Americans’ 549.

With Attu secured, the Allies turned to Kiska. On August 15, a force of 35,000 American and 5,000 Canadian soldiers landed on Kiska. They were prepared for another round of bitter combat as had been fought on Attu, but when they reached the island, they discovered the Japanese had already evacuated, although they had left behind land mines, sea mines, and booby traps. Between these and a friendly fire incident in which Canadians and Americans began shooting at each other, the Allies lost about 100 killed and 200 wounded.

But the Aleutians were secure. In Japan, the government attempted to frame the deaths of 2,300 Japanese soldiers on Attu as an inspiring sacrifice for the Emperor and the Japanese nation, but a defeat is a defeat, and coming just days after the death of Admiral Yamamoto became public, it was hard not to think that the fortunes of war had turned against Japan.

The Emperor himself was displeased with the outcome. He told the Army chief of staff, “In the future, please see to it that you have a reasonable chance of success before launching into an operation.” Sound advice, there.

To his own military aide, the Emperor's complaints were even more pointed. "If we continue getting involved in such operations it will only raise enemy morale, as in the case of Guadalcanal. Neutral nations will waver; China will be encouraged, and it will have a serious effect of the nations of the Greater East Asia Sphere. Isn't there any way we can confront the United States forces somewhere and beat them?"

The defeat triggered another round of bickering between the Navy and the Army. Navy commanders complained that the occupations of these islands were more acts of showmanship than of true military necessity. One particularly vocal admiral, Toyoda Soemu, referred to the Army as "horse dung," and declared he would rather his daughter marry a beggar than an Army commander.

The loss of Japan's forward defenses in the Aleutians meant that precious resources would have to be diverted from the defense of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands to fortify positions in the Kurile Islands, north of Japan proper.

The hard feelings between the Army and the Navy were partly due to the fact that neither service was getting the equipment and materials they felt they needed to fight the Americans properly. They tended to blame each other for this, as well as the government. Commanders in each service believed they could put to better use the resources that the other service was claiming.

Both services were losing ships, planes, vehicles, and equipment faster than Japanese industry could replace them. The Japanese government and industry strove to increase military production. In the first year after the Pearl Harbor attack, Japanese military production increased 25%. But over that same period, US military production increased 65%.

The whole purpose of the Japanese occupation of the nations of East Asia was to secure sources of raw materials for Japanese industry. And just as the brutal reality of the Japanese occupation belied the lofty promise of the "Co-Prosperity Sphere," the Japanese occupation also failed to produce the promised benefits even for Japan. Local military commanders in Japanese-occupied nations were either indifferent to the economic need to increase production of resources, or were inept in attempting to fulfill it. Japanese merchant shipping was inadequate to the task of bringing all those raw materials to the Home Islands, and the increasing effectiveness of the American submarine attacks on Japanese shipping further constricted what was available to Japanese industry.

Japan and the occupied lands of East Asia and the Western Pacific were supposed to be uniting into the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The principle was admirable and persuasive. Japan, the one Asian nation that had successfully stood its ground and retained its independence against Western encroachment into the region, would bring its Asian sisters and brothers into a new order, one in which Asians would work together for their mutual defense and economic benefit and remain aloof from both the old scourge of Western colonialism and the new scourge of Communism.

There were in Japan idealists who truly believed in the importance of freeing Asia from Western exploitation, and there was a certain logic to the proposed Co-Prosperity Sphere. Resource-rich nations like Indochina and Malaya needed Japan to defend them; Japan needed access to their resources to provide that defense.

This call to pan-Asian unity inspired millions of people from India to New Guinea who shared the dream of an end to Western exploitation; of an Asia governed for the benefit of Asians. And even though the reality was a cruel disappointment, the dream lived on.

One person who became inspired by the dream was Ba Maw. He was born in 1893 in the town of Maubin on the Irawaddy Delta in southwestern Burma. His father was an ethnic Mon with a western education, who served in the Burmese government as a tutor and translator. Ba got an MA from the University of Calcutta, and went on to study at Cambridge and the University of Bordeaux in France, where he earned his doctoral degree.

He returned to Burma, where he practiced law and got involved in politics. In 1934, he became the Burmese education minister, and in 1937, the first minister and leader of the Burmese Poor Man's Party.

In July 1940, he resigned from government and called upon the Burmese to refuse to participate in Britain's war against the Axis until Burma achieved independence. For this, he was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to prison.

In April 1942, he escaped from prison and fled to the countryside, where he joined the Burmese Independence Army, which had been formed in December 1941 with the goal of ejecting the British from Burma with the aid of the Japanese.

Once this was achieved, however, the Burmese Independence Army quickly discovered that the Japanese intended to occupy and rule Burma themselves and showed no interest whatsoever in sharing power with Burmese nationalists.

Japanese policy in Burma, as elsewhere, changed in 1943. I already told you that the Japanese declared the formal independence of the Philippines at this time. This was done out of fear that the Americans might declare Filipino independence first, thus positioning Japan as the colonial power in the islands. By this time, the Japanese were also interested in recruiting allies among the peoples of the Co-Prosperity Sphere, as it was becoming apparent that the war was turning against them.

On August 1, 1943, the Japanese declared Burma an independent nation, with Ba Maw as head of state and prime minister. That same day the government of the new Burmese nation declared war on the United Kingdom and the United States and formalized an alliance with Japan.

But in Burma, as elsewhere, the Japanese Army remained as an occupation force and showed no deference to the civilian government. Officers of the former Burmese Independence Army, now

the Burma National Army, were required to salute any Japanese soldier they encountered, down to the lowliest private. As one Burmese officer observed, “If the British sucked our blood, the Japanese ground our bones.”

In the countryside, Communist fighters fought on. They were no more willing to do deals with Japan than they had been with Britain. By 1944, commanders of the Burma National Army were beginning to reach out to the Communist fighters to discuss combining forces against the Japanese occupation.

But I am getting ahead of myself. In October 1943, Philippine independence was declared. That same month, the Azad Hind, the Provisional Government of Free India, was established in Singapore, with Subhas Chandra Bose declared head of state and head of government. Japan turned over to the Azad Hind civil administration of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Indian territories under Japanese occupation. The new government issued its own stamps and currency. The Azad Hind also was formally in command of Indian National Army units stationed on the front line between Burma and India.

The Azad Hind declared war on the United Kingdom. It also declared war on the United States, although there was some opposition to this even within the new government’s own cabinet, but Bose insisted.

On November 5, 1943, the Greater East Asia Conference convened in Tokyo. Present were representatives of six nations: Tōjō Hideki, Prime Minister of Japan, Zhang Jinghui, Prime Minister of Manchuria, Wang Jingwei, President of the Reorganized Republic of China, Ba Maw, Head of State and Prime Minister of Burma, José Laurel, President of the Republic of the Philippines, and Prince Wan Waithayakon, representing the Kingdom of Thailand. Subhas Chandra Bose also attended as Head of State and Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of Free India, but only as an observer, since India was still under British rule.

Ironically, discussions at the conference were conducted in English. Notably, there were no representatives from Malaya or Singapore or the East Indies, territories Japan still claimed as its own.

Prime Minister Tōjō chaired the meeting, He told the delegates, “It is an incontrovertible fact that the nations of Greater East Asia are bound in every respect by ties of an inseparable relationship.” Wang Jingwei told the delegates that the nations of East Asia needed to love not only their own countries, but all of East Asia. President Laurel spoke passionately, declaring that “there can be no power that can stop or delay the acquisition by the one billion Orientals of the free and untrammeled right and opportunity of shaping their own destiny. God in His infinite wisdom will not abandon Japan and will not abandon the peoples of Greater East Asia. God will come and descend from Heaven, weep with us, and glorify the courage and bravery of our peoples and enable us to liberate ourselves and make our children and our children’s children free, happy, and prosperous.”

Ba Maw spoke of how his "Asiatic blood has always called to other Asiatics…In my dreams, both sleeping and waking, I have heard the voice of Asia calling to her children…Today, I hear Asia's voice calling again, but this time not in a dream…"

The vision articulated at this conference was inspirational. Everyone present, Tōjō included, were caught up in the moment. The reality of the Japanese occupation was ugly and brutal, but the dream could move hearts nevertheless. The dream would live on, far longer than the Co-Prosperity Sphere.

[music: Traditional, "Mo Li Hua."]

One of the most important reasons the Japanese convened the Greater East Asia Conference was the hope that the message would get through to China. Wang Jingwei's government was cooperating with Japan, but China's stubborn generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek, fought on, the only Asian leader maintaining an active military resistance to Japan. The delegates at the conference found this baffling. Why could Chiang not see that he was merely a puppet, serving the colonial interests of the Western powers?

The Americans and the British worked hard to dispel that appearance. In October, shortly before the conference in Tokyo, Churchill and Roosevelt signed an agreement with Chiang under which their countries renounced all their special treaty rights in China and affirmed the sovereignty of the Republic of China. This action shamed the Japanese government into making a similar declaration in January 1944, renouncing Japan's treaty rights in China.

Even within the Japanese government, there were those questioning Japanese policy in China. If there was no reason for Chiang to be fighting this war, was it not equally true that there was no reason for Japan to be fighting it? Perhaps it was time to open negotiations with China to end the fighting and free up the 80% of the Japanese Army that was stationed there, so they could aid in the struggle against the real enemies: the British and the Americans.

But there were even louder voices in Japan demanding that any peace agreement with Chiang include recognition of Japan's interests in China. These interests by now were so enlarged that for Chiang to agree to them would be tantamount to surrender. Japanese diplomats never were able to solve that dilemma.

Relations with China were also a point of contention on the Allied side. In August 1943, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill held another summit meeting, their fourth since US entry into the war, this time in the Canadian city of Québec.

I've mentioned the Québec conference before, and I will have more to say about it in a future episode, but I mention it now because it was at Québec that the two leaders agreed to the appointment of Field Marshal Lord Mountbatten as commander of the Southeast Asia command,

assigned to establish and maintain an airlift to China as well as advance into Burma and reopen the Burma Road.

That was all well and good, but the British and the Americans had different visions for the role of China in the war and in the postwar world. Roosevelt wanted the end of colonialism. He saw his role as completing the work begun by Woodrow Wilson. Wilson had fought for the right of self-determination for all peoples, with the unspoken caveat that only European peoples need apply. Roosevelt wanted to extend Wilson's principle to all the peoples of the world. His vision for the future was self-government across the globe, with an international organization to maintain the peace.

This peace would be enforced by what Roosevelt called the Four Policemen. Those would be the United Kingdom, the United States, the USSR, and China. Each would have its assigned sphere of influence: Western Europe, Africa, the Middle East and South Asia for the British, the Western Hemisphere for the United States, Eastern Europe and Central Asia for the USSR, and East Asia for China.

Why China? Because China and the United States had close relations at the time, and because Roosevelt reasoned that an Asian power should maintain order in East Asia, and China was the only nation big enough and strong enough to take on that responsibility, other than Japan, which had disqualified itself when it started a war.

In November 1943, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Chiang met at a summit conference in Cairo. Roosevelt and Churchill would then go on to Teheran to meet with Stalin, but that too is a story for another episode. Stalin was invited to join the meeting with Chiang, but he declined, citing the fact that the USSR was not at war with Japan and his participation might therefore be seen by the Japanese as a provocation.

Winston Churchill was not comfortable with Roosevelt's thinking about China. Churchill did not consider China a great power and worried that Roosevelt's interest in China was a sign that America's attention was shifting from Europe to the Pacific. Elevating China to the status of a peer nation would also surely encourage the independence movement in India.

Chiang had his own agenda for the meeting. He wanted China and Britain to plan a joint offensive to force the Japanese out of Burma, with the Chinese Army attacking from the north and the British executing an amphibious landing on the southern coast of Burma to disrupt Japanese supply lines. Churchill's goal was to bring Burma back into the British Empire, and while he didn't mind the prospect of China assisting in that goal, he was reluctant to approve the proposed operation. A British amphibious landing in Burma would draw ships and landing craft and supplies from Europe just as preparations were being made for Operation Overlord. Churchill was also skeptical of the Chinese Army's ability to sustain an offensive against the Japanese. They hadn't been able to pull that off for the past seven years, why would anyone think it could happen now?

At the conference, Churchill argued for China to begin the offensive on its own. He questioned the need for that British amphibious landing and told Chiang Britain could not consider such a move until after Italy was defeated. Roosevelt pressed Churchill to participate in the joint operation with China.

US Navy chief Ernest King had his own ideas. He questioned the need for a Burma operation at all. US commanders in the theater had settled on a strategy of "island hopping" across the Pacific until they got within reach of Japan. King thought that was the best bet and that the US had no reason to get involved with China or with costly military operations on the Asian mainland.

But Roosevelt disagreed with both of them. He promised Chiang that amphibious invasion in Burma and he promised the US would send China huge amounts of military aid, enough to equip dozens of divisions. He would later renege on both promises.

Before I end today's episode, I want to talk about the Burma Railway, and I want to begin by emphasizing that the Burma Railway is an entirely different project from the Burma Road, so bear that in mind.

I've mentioned the Burma Road several times already. This was the route by which the Allies sent supplies and equipment to China, at least until the Japanese occupied Burma and cut it off. Technically speaking, the Burma Road was a road the Chinese built during the first year of the war with Japan. It began at Kunming, which is the capital of Yunnan Province, which lies inland along China's borders with Indochina and Burma, and ended at Lashio, a town in northern Burma. It stretched about 1200 kilometers or 700 miles over some pretty challenging terrain. We're talking foothills of the Himalayas here.

The road ended at Lashio because Lashio was connected by rail to Rangoon, the port city that is also the capital of Burma. Hence Allied aid shipments could be unloaded at Rangoon, carried by rail to Lashio, then transferred to trucks for the trip to Kunming via the Burma Road and thence on to Chongqing, the Chinese provisional capital.

As I said, technically the Burma Road is the road from Lashio to Kunming, although historians commonly use the term "Burma Road" to refer to the entire route, including the rail line from Rangoon to Lashio.

The Burma Railway is a completely different thing. For starters, it was a Japanese project, not an Allied project.

The Japanese invaded and occupied Burma in early 1942, which cut off the Burma Road, creating a hardship for China. But the occupation of Burma gave the Japanese a supply problem of their own: how to get materiel from Japan all the way to Burma. Initially, the Japanese supplied Burma by sea, but a look at the map will tell you that this requires a 3,000 kilometer trip

around the Malay Peninsula, during which the cargo ships were vulnerable to attack by enemy submarines.

A far easier alternative would be to unload the cargo at Bangkok and send it by rail into Burma. The difficulty with this alternative is that there was no rail link between Thailand and Burma. The British had been considering the possibility of building such a rail connection since the 19th century, but the terrain in the region is rugged and the climate rainy, which means there are rivers running though every valley between the mountains, which made building a railroad a daunting challenge.

Perhaps it wasn't worth the effort to build this line in peacetime, but now there was a war on and Japan needed to supply its soldiers in Burma, not only to hold that nation against any Allied counterattack, but also to supply an invasion of India, if and when that became feasible.

The Japanese chose a railway station on a Thai rail line that began at Bangkok and a station that lay on a Burmese railway line that began at Rangoon and mapped out a connection between them. This would become the Burma Railway, a route approximately 400 kilometers or 250 miles. And just as most of the route of the Burma Road lay in China, most of the route of the Burma Railway lay in Thailand, despite their names. Are you confused yet?

To build this railway, the Japanese dismantled rail lines in Malaya and the East Indies and repurposed the rails and ties for this project. Unlike most railroad projects, where a construction crew begins at one end of the line and builds it out toward the destination, the Japanese were in a hurry and they had plenty of labor available, so they set up construction gangs all along the route, to lay the track, excavate the cuts, and build the hundreds of bridges and viaducts needed.

Yes, about those laborers the Japanese had in abundance. The Japanese used slave laborers. About 200,000 of them were Asians, mostly Burmese and Malayans, but also including Chinese, Indians, Vietnamese, and Javanese. They took women and children as well as men.

The Japanese also forced some 60,000 Allied prisoners of war to labor on the Burma Railway. About half of these prisoners were British. The rest were Dutch, Australian, Indian, and a few hundred Americans.

The tropical heat and the frequent heavy rains and the innumerable mosquitoes would have made the work unpleasant enough, but the 12,000 Japanese soldiers who guarded and supervised the laborers treated them with appalling cruelty. Potable water was often unavailable and food in short supply, especially in the most remote work camps. Prisoners were fed modest rations of rice, along with bits of meat or fish, which often was spoiled or contaminated. And they worked long hours, as long as 18 hours per day, at grueling labor as the guards watched. Prisoners were subjected to beatings or torture when they were seen not to be working hard enough, or sometimes just for sport.

Under these conditions, including a complete lack of sanitation, diseases such as cholera, malaria, and dysentery were rampant. Laborers were chronically sick and malnourished, but forced to work just the same.

The Allied POWs were typically granted a little more leeway than the Asian laborers and were able to play music or sing or put on skits to entertain each other during rare moments of free time. A number of artists among the prisoners created artwork depicting life in the work camps using whatever materials they could scrounge up. This was dangerous and anyone caught would be subjected to severe punishment. After the war, some of these artworks were used as evidence in war crimes trials.

Roughly a quarter of the Allied POWs died while working on the Burma Railway. The lives of the Asian laborers are less well documented, and most of their names are not even known. About half the Asian laborers died working on the railway, which tells you something about their treatment relative to the POWs. It also tells you something about Japanese claims that they were liberating their fellow Asians from Western oppression.

It is for these reasons that the Burma Railway is sometimes called the Death Railway.

One of the artists among the British POWs was the 22-year-old Englishman Ronald Searle. He survived the experience and the war and managed to produce and save some 300 drawings documenting what he had seen. After the war, Searle became an accomplished and successful cartoonist, who made his name with a series of cartoons about the fictional St. Trinian's, a girls' boarding school in which the students are appallingly badly behaved. The cartoons inspired no fewer than seven feature films between 1954 and 2009.

His cartoons exhibit a distinctive scratchy drawing style and dark sense of humor that influenced a generation of cartoonists who came after him, including Gerald Scarfe, Edward Gorey, and Matt Groening. Both of those qualities of his work surely arose out of his experiences working on the Burma Railway.

Ronald Searle died on December 30, 2011, at the age of 91.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Matt, Alexander, and Lisa for their kind donations, and thank you to Aaron for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Matt, Alexander, Lisa, and Aaron help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I am happy to report that my son's heart surgery went about as well as you could hope for. He's home from the hospital and doing fine, although he will require a lot of care for a couple of months more. I will try to get the podcast back onto its usual schedule as soon as I can, but for now, I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at the Allied air campaign over Germany. Before 1943, it had not produced the hoped-for results, but that is about to change. Operation Gomorrah, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1952, French novelist Pierre Boulle published a novel titled *The Bridge over the River Kwai*, which is a fictional story set during the construction of the Burma Railway. Boulle was himself a French prisoner of the Japanese in Indochina, though he had nothing to do with the Burma Railway. Although the novel describes harsh treatment of its British prisoners, the treatment of POWs in the construction of the real-world Burma Railway was far worse.

The novel was adapted into a 1957 film with the title slightly altered: *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, starring William Holden, Alec Guinness, and Sessue Hayakawa, directed by David Lean, and released through Columbia Pictures. It was a big commercial success, becoming the highest grossing film of 1957 in North America. It was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won seven, including Best Picture, Best Director for Lean, Best Actor for Guinness, and Best Adapted Screenplay. In 1998, the American Film Institute listed *The Bridge on the River Kwai* at number 13 on its list of the 100 greatest American films.

And also, eleven years later, Boulle wrote another novel that was made into a successful feature film. That one was titled *The Planet of the Apes*.

[music: Closing War Theme]