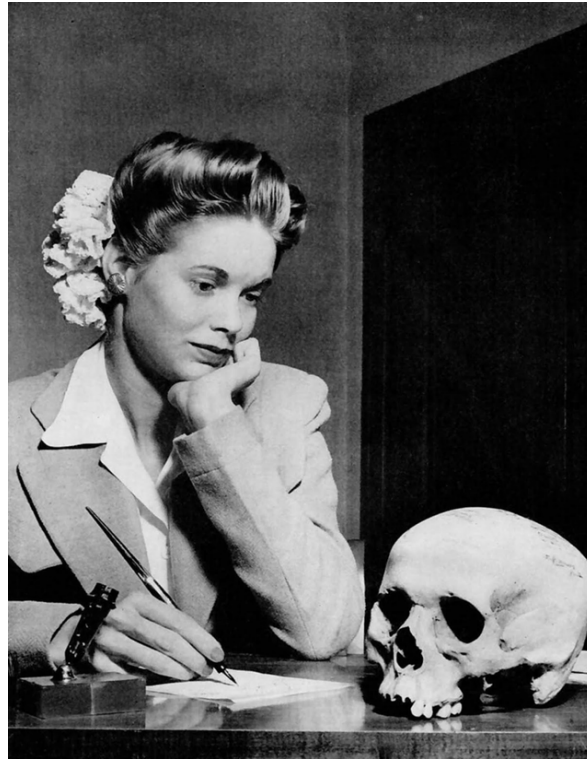


HH2033 – Outline

Total War in Asia and the Pacific, 1931-1951

Semester 1, 2026-2027



Arizona war worker (Natalie Nickerson) writes a thank you letter to her boyfriend for the autographed Japanese skull he sent her from New Guinea. "Picture of the Week," *Life*, May 22, 1944.

Subject creator & coordinator

Professor J. Charles Schencking
History Department, SHHK 05-22

Office hours:

Tuesday 2 pm to 4pm

Location and time of lecture

Location: LT29, South Spine, SS2-B1-16

Time: Monday, 12:30 to 14:20

Tutorials:

Mon 14.30 to 15.20: TR+92 South Spine, SS2-01-13

Mon 15.30 to 16.20: LHS-TR+25, LHS-B2-02 The Hive

Mon 16.30 to 17.20: LHS-TR+25, LHS-B2-02 The Hive

Mon 17.30 to 18.20: LHS-TR+25, LHS-B2-02 The Hive

Welcome & overview:

Greetings and welcome! I am delighted that you have decided to enrol in this course. The conflict between Japan and the United States of America, and the broader war with which it was intertwined, fundamentally changed our world and altered how warfare has been conceptualized and waged ever since. It is no exaggeration to claim that World War II was the most consequential event in modern history.

This four-year struggle, fought across the largest and most environmentally diverse theatre of war in history, was also defined by some of the most savage acts of brutality ever witnessed in twentieth-century combat. At the same time, it was marked by profound constitutional and legal crises on the American home front. Well-established rules and principles of war were frequently abandoned—both by the combatants during the conflict and subsequently in the war crimes trials that followed.

Throughout this course, we will explore several core questions and themes:

Why War? After years of peaceful coexistence and lucrative trade, why did the US and Japan eventually go to war? Why did their generally amicable relationship deteriorate so rapidly? Was the conflict between these two nations “inevitable,” or was it the result of conscious choices made by both sides?

Economic Warfare? What did the United States hope to accomplish through trade embargos and restrictions after 1939? Is rendering another country illiquid by freezing all of its assets inherently an act of economic warfare?

Japan’s Aims in Expanding War? What did Japan hope to accomplish by attacking the United States? Could Japanese military leaders have pursued a more ambitious or different opening gambit in December 1941?

The Ascendancy of Intelligence and Logistics in War: What roles did intelligence and logistics play over the course of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific? Why was mastering both critical to American victory? Why was failing to do so crippling for Japan?

The Challenges of Total War: What challenges emerged in fighting a “total war” over the largest and most geographically diverse theatre of war in history? How did both sides meet—or fail to meet—these challenges?

Technology and Doctrine: What new technologies or weapon systems played decisive roles in determining the outcomes of specific battles and the overall war between 1941 and 1945? How were these new technologies integrated into existing military doctrines or theories of war?

Brutality in Combat: What accounts for the atrocious acts of savage barbarism carried out by soldiers on both the Japanese and the Allied sides during the Pacific War?

Developing and Successfully Deploying New Technologies of Warfare: What was the most expensive weapons system of the Second World War, and why did it almost fail to secure any measurable result?

Ethics and Strategic Bombing: Was it a “war crime” for the United States to undertake and perfect urban area firebombing against Japan between 9 March 1945 to 15 August 1945?

The Long Torturous Road to Surrender: When was Japan’s last overall strategic battlefield victory in WWII? More importantly given the answer to this question, why did it take Japan’s leaders so long to surrender? What finally convinced them to do so in August 1945?

Aftermath: What happens when a nation loses a “total war”? How has the nature of defeat and occupation changed over the course of human history?

A New World Order? Did the Allied powers remain true to the aims of the 1941 Atlantic Charter and why does this legacy matter—or not—today?

Last but not least, there are two important reflections on modern war that I want you to keep front and center in your minds throughout this course.

1. How accurate is President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s 1955 assessment of “modern war” when applied to the conflict between Japan and the United States? Why is this perspective so critical for us to keep in mind today?

“Remember this: when you resort to force as the arbiter of human difficulty, you didn’t know where you were going; but generally speaking, if you get deeper and deeper, there was just no limit except what is imposed by the limitations of force itself.” President and General Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 12, 1955.

2. Similarly, how accurate is General Giulio Douhet’s 1928 assessment of “modern war” when exploring this conflict:

“Any distinction between belligerents and non-belligerents is no longer admissible today either in fact or theory. Not in theory because when nations are at war, everyone takes part in it: the soldier carrying his gun, the woman loading shells in a factory, the farmer growing wheat, the scientist experimenting in his laboratory Not in fact because nowadays the offensive may reach anyone; and it begins to look now as though the safest place may be the trenches.” General Giulio Douhet, 1928.

And finally: what can an analysis-based exploration of the Pacific War teach us about humanity, warfare, and the world we live in today?

Core expectations of this course / subject / unit

1. I ask you to arrive to class on time every week, no exception, no excuses.
2. I ask you to be open to the possibility that everything you thought you knew about the topics, themes, and ideas covered in this course may need re-evaluation. Embrace this opportunity and don't remain wedded to confirmation bias.
3. I ask you to be engaged and engaging every week—with the course material, your peers, me, the tutors, guest presenters and with your seminar groups.
4. I ask that all work you submit be your own original work (including ideas, opinions, assertions, research) at all times.
5. I ask you to do the work that this course requires, each week, each tutorial.
6. I ask you not to let the fear of failure or appearing foolish keep you from thinking differently and expressing ideas—backed by evidence—however contrary they may seem to existing understandings of the topics we explore.
7. Most importantly, I ask you to remain **curious** and never shy away from asking or exploring the most important question of humanity: Why?

In return, each week I will endeavour to make this subject interesting, stimulating, and deeply thought-provoking.

Some important ground rules

1. All assignments must be submitted on time, exactly when they are due—no exceptions and without excuse.
2. Neither my tutors nor I will answer course-content related questions or assignment-related questions via email. Dedicated time is set aside for questions during each lecture and tutorial. I will also be available to explore questions in person with you during my office hours. The tutors will also hold regular office hours.
3. Attendance and active participation in both lectures and tutorials are absolutely essential to your success in this course. Turn up ready to engage.
4. Having taught bright, highly motivated students at several of the world's leading universities, I have learned one invaluable lesson: never underestimate students. I will not underestimate you; I will treat you with the intellectual respect you deserve. In return, I ask that you do not underestimate your peers and that you treat everyone in this course with the same respect you expect to receive.
5. Mobile phones are not to be used during lecture or tutorials.
6. Laptops: Policy regarding in-class laptop usage will be discussed during our first lecture.
7. Neither my tutors nor I will read drafts assignment submissions or outlines. Assignments are assignments and will be treated like any other exam.

Tentative Schedule of Lectures

Week 1 – 10 August

No Class – Holiday *No lectures or tutorials this week.*

Week 2 – 17 August

Introduction and the Big Questions Why study war? Why study this war? What is war, and why is it a common, recurring theme in human history? Is there such a thing as a "just war"? Can a "just war" that is fought outside the accepted rules of war remain a "just war"? Was war between Japan and the United States "inevitable"?

- **Reading:**
 - Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War* (New York: Mariner Books), pp. 44–49.

Week 3 – 24 August

"Destined for War" or the "Road to Nothing"? Japan–United States relations from 13 November 1852 to 31 December 1940.

- **Readings:**
 1. Letter from the President of the United States, Millard Fillmore, to His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor of Japan, 13 November 1852.
 2. Charles Merrill, "Japan's Disaster May Mean New Understanding with America," *Boston Globe*, September 9, 1923, p. 4.
 3. Franklin Roosevelt, "Roosevelt Says," *Macon Telegraph*, April 30, 1925, p. 4.

Week 4 – 31 August

Whose War? Franklin Roosevelt's war, Harold Ickes's war, Tōjō Hideki's war, or Yamamoto Isoroku's war? Who is responsible for the great aberration, and why?

Assignment #1 Due (Worth 30%) *Document exercise and evidence-based opinion piece.*

- **Readings:**
 - The readings required for Assignment #1.

Week 5 – 7 September

Pacific War Retrospective: The seven failures of Pearl Harbor, the long betrayal, and Doolittle's "revenge."

- **Reading:**
 - John J. Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), pp. 69–108.

Week 6 – 14 September

The Tide Turns: Intelligence, logistics, and the new face of war?

- **Readings:**
 - Selected memoirs from "Lost Battles," in Haruko Cook and Theodore Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: The New Press, 1992):
 - Ogawa Masatsugu, "The 'Green Desert' of New Guinea," pp. 267–276.
 - Ogawa Tamotsu, "Soldiers' Deaths," pp. 276–281.
 - Yamauchi Takeo, "Honorable Death on Saipan," pp. 281–292.

Week 7 – 21 September

Brutal Combat in Unfamiliar Environments: Brutal combat in unfamiliar environments—and unconscionable racism on the home front.

- **Readings:**
 - Selected narratives from "Tales of the Pacific," in Studs Terkel, ed., *The Good War: An American Oral History of World War II* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001):
 - Eugene Sledge, pp. 59–66.
 - Robert Lekachman, pp. 66–68.
 - Anton Bilek, pp. 85–97.

Week 8 – 28 September

Reading Week *No lectures or tutorials this week.* Enjoy your break!

Week 9 – 5 October

Getting to Surrender: The challenging paths to secure unconditional surrender and utilising the luxury of time to fight an "American" war.

- **Reading:**
 - Sandra Wilson, Michael Sturma, Arjun Subrahmanyam, Dean Aszkielowicz, and J. Charles Schencking, *The U.S. and the War in the Pacific, 1941–45* (New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 28–39

Week 10 – 12 October

A Revolutionary New Path and a Bold New Super Weapon: A alternative way to secure unconditional surrender?

Assignment #2 Due (Worth 30%) *Document exercise and reflection piece.*

- **Readings:**

1. J. Charles Schencking, “Prelude to Prometheus,” *Superfortress B-29: Boeing and the Dawn of the Military Industrial Complex* (draft chapter 7).
2. J. Charles Schencking, “Inferno,” *Superfortress B-29: Boeing and the Dawn of the Military Industrial Complex* (draft chapter 8).

Week 11 – 19 October

Carrots, Sticks, and Ultimately Surrender: Why did it take this long?

- **Readings:**

1. The Potsdam Declaration and the Draft Potsdam Declaration.
2. Sandra Wilson, Michael Sturma, Arjun Subrahmanyam, Dean Aszkielowicz, and J. Charles Schencking, *The U.S. and the War in the Pacific, 1941–45* (New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 76–88.

Week 12 – 26 October

The Reckoning: Lost battles, stolen islands, and a return to normalcy?

- **Readings:**

1. The Treaty of Shimoda, 1855.
2. The Treaty of Saint Petersburg, 1875.
3. The Soviet–Japanese Neutrality Pact, 1941.
4. The Atlantic Charter, 1941.
5. The Cairo Declaration, 1943.
6. The “secret” Far East Agreement of the 1945 Yalta Conference

Week 13 – 2 November

Crimes, War Crimes, Justice, and Vengeance: Can there be anything but “victor’s justice”?

Assignment #3 Due (Worth 20%) *Individual reflection and group tutorial presentation.*

- **Reading for Assignment #3:**

- One case study selected from Robert Cribb and Sandra Wilson, *Twelve Japanese War Criminals and One Who Got Away* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2026).

Week 14 – 9 November

No Class – Holiday: *No lectures or tutorials this week.*

10% of your grade is based on total attendance and total, engaged, and engaging participation in lectures

10% of your grade is based on total attendance and total, engaged, and engaging participation in tutorials