

Abstract

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 was a storm of nations, all pursuing their own agendas with respect to the coming peace. Most notable were the Big Four: Great Britain, the United States, France, and Italy. Close behind them, however, was Japan, the Allied power largely responsible for the capture of German colonies in East Asia. Though it acted under the approval of a treaty with Great Britain, Japan's true aim was to utilize the chaos embroiling Europe to solidify their influence and territorial gains in Asia. Their territorial ambitions sated for the moment, Japan largely ignored the Western theater of the war, and their peace plans assumed that each nation would tend to its own affairs. However, after the Western powers announced an armistice and declared that the following peace would be determined by President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, Japan set out once more to establish its place in the post-war order. Its requests of the Conference were twofold: Japan would retain control of all territories captured from Germany during the war, and the soon-to-be League of Nations would guarantee racial equality among its member states. Seeking to protect its own colonial territories, yet not wanting the League to fall before it started, Great Britain assented on the former point but refused to vote on the latter. The United States followed suit and dismissed the proposal for racial equality, stating that such a matter must be agreed upon unanimously. Japan never forgot this perceived insult, and resentment festered until it finally withdrew from the League in February 1933. Japan's behavior during World War I and the ensuing peace talks proves that its territorial ambitions were nowhere near sated by its wartime acquisitions.

Research Questions:

1. What was the significance of Japan's contribution to the Great War?
2. What was the impetus for and impact of the Racial Equality Proposal?
3. How did Japan interact with the other Allied Powers at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919?

Japan's Role in the Great War

- Assistance in the Pacific
 - Began with protecting British shipping from German destroyers
 - "Once a belligerent power, Japan cannot restrict her action only to the destruction of hostile enemy cruisers." – Kato Takaake, Japanese Foreign Minister
 - Seized German colonies in China and Micronesia, including the port city of Qingdao
- The Twenty-One Demands
 - Section 1: Cession of German holdings on the mainland to Japan
 - Section 2: Cession of railways and mining rights in Manchuria and Mongolia
 - Section 3: Protection against Chinese government action for the Han-yeh-Ping Iron and Coal Company
 - Section 4: Forbade ceding Chinese land, islands, or ports to any other power
 - Section 5: Transformed China into a Japanese protectorate
- Assistance in Europe
 - Japan largely ignored British requests for naval aid in the European theater
 - Eventually, they did send a squadron to assist operations in the Mediterranean

Japanese Peace Plan

- Initially, Japan assumed that the peace following the Great War would follow the pattern of previous wars. As such, they maintained a relatively simple plan for peace:
 - Japan would retain all territories which they had seized from Germany during the war
 - Japan would not involve itself in any affairs pertaining only to the Western Powers
 - The Western Powers would not involve themselves in any affairs pertaining only to Japan and its immediate sphere of influence
 - On such matters as concerned all Allied Powers, Japan would act in concert with its allies
- Wilson's Fourteen Points forming the basis for the post-war order came as a surprise to Japan. As such, their delegation to the Paris Peace Conference had to rapidly adjust their peace plan.
 - The Japanese delegation was headed by Baron Makino Nobuaki
 - Japan's main goals at the Peace Conference were to retain their territory and to secure recognition as a world power
 - Towards this end, Makino presented the Racial Equality Proposal, intended to prevent racial discrimination against Japanese soldiers during operations with the League of Nations

Territory gained in the Great War:

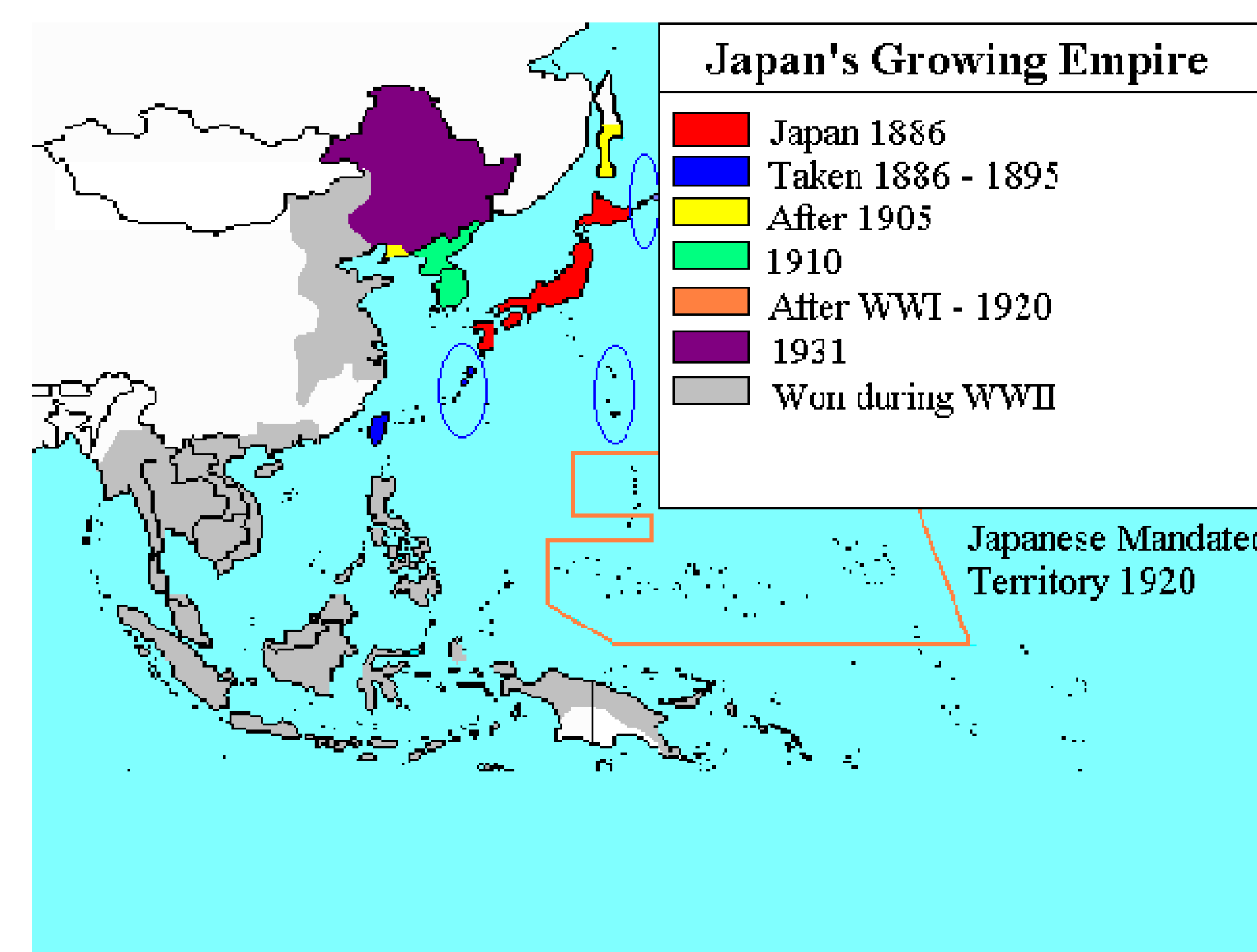


Figure #1: Territory gained by Japan after WWI, John Dewar Gleissner

Racial Equality Proposal

"The equality of nations being a basic principle of the League of Nations, the High Contracting Parties agree to accord, as soon as possible, to all aliens nationals of States Members of the League equal and just treatment in every respect, making no distinction, either in law or in fact, on account of their race or nationality."

Makino Nobuaki, Japanese Delegation:



Figure #2: Makino Nobuaki, Japan Center for Asian Historical Records

Paris Peace Conference and Aftermath

- Despite its intention, Britain interpreted the Racial Equality Proposal as mandating equal treatment of all peoples, regardless of race, even within an empire's own borders
 - Britain openly opposed the proposal, with the passive support of the United States
 - When it came to a vote, the proposal passed unanimously, with the notable exception of Great Britain and the United States, who abstained
 - Woodrow Wilson tabled the idea, claiming that such an idea required fully unanimous approval
 - Rather than lose out on a seat at the table entirely, the Japanese delegation elected to drop the proposal
 - In exchange, the Allied Powers agreed to Japan's demands for territory
 - Nonetheless, Japan saw the proposal's failure as an insult that they would not soon forget

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