

## **Micronesian Experiences of the War in the Pacific**

Lin Poyer

Since the initial encounters of Micronesians and Europeans in the sixteenth century Micronesia has undergone colonial rule by four world powers: Spain (mid-1500s to 1899), Germany (1899-1914), Japan (1914-1944), and the United States (1944 to the current termination of United Nations trusteeship). The first three changes of control between colonial rulers were accomplished with little impact on Islanders. When the United States wrested control of the area from Japan, however, it was by some of the most destructive and bloodiest fighting of World War II.

World War II was global warfare and Micronesians were caught in the middle of the Japanese and Allied contest for the central Pacific. Under Japanese military control Micronesians were subjected to harsh discipline, forced labor, relocation, and the confiscation of farm products. Some men were drafted into the military and took part in the fighting. Other men, women, and children worked on military construction and picked up the load of extra labor to provide food, clothing, and shelter for themselves and the Japanese soldiers and civilians living with them. Micronesians also suffered the danger and destruction of Allied military attack, and the material shortages and psychological pressures of the war years.

As Allied forces achieved victory in the Pacific, wartime hardships were dramatically replaced by a massive influx of American goods and personnel, and Micronesians came under United States administration, which espoused democratic ideals and tolerance of native tradition, but had its own agenda for the islands' future. The brief, intense period of change during and after the war years provided Islanders with novel experiences and understandings of themselves and their relationships with foreigners. The results of the impact continue to shape Micronesian society.

### Background

In order to understand the impact of the war on Micronesia we must begin by outlining recent Micronesian history. Spanish colonial control had little direct impact on the islands (except for the Marianas); but during the nineteenth century traditional life was transformed by contact with European traders and missionaries. Most Micronesians became Christians, and mission schools operated on the larger islands. Cash was scarce, but people sold copra, crafts, and labor to buy cloth, iron tools, and a few other European goods. Still, when Germany purchased control of the islands from Spain in 1899 the lifestyle of most Micronesians centered on fishing, cultivating taro, breadfruit, and other crops, and raising domestic animals. During the German era (1899-1914) the government encouraged the development of trade and reorganized land tenure on the European model. Health care, child education, and local government were for the most part handled by local people themselves, although the Germans enforced a legal code. But neither Spain nor Germany was a Pacific power, and these governments were not interested in extensive change or development of the islands (again, excepting the Spanish in the Marianas).

When Japan allied itself with Britain in World War I, the Japanese navy moved to take the islands from Germany in 1914. Micronesia was officially sanctioned as a League of Nations mandate under Japan in 1921. Unlike the German and Spanish governments Japan was vitally interested in its Pacific empire; as a result the era of Japanese control saw enormous changes in Micronesian life. Japan's interest in the islands was primarily economic and, as time went by, strategic. It added the mandated islands to its "inner empire" (which included Taiwan, Korea, the Liaotung Peninsula, and the southern part of Sakhalin Island). Japan governed its colonial possessions closely, using tight bureaucratic control, an efficient police force, and manipulation of local cultural institutions (such as traditional leaders) to manage the local populations (Peattie 1988). And there was always strong military support, if the colonial administrators needed it.

The Japanese government expended enormous attention, energy, money, and personnel on their island empire, even before the war years (Yanaihara 1940). The first decades of Japanese control saw the establishment of public schools, health services, public works, and an elaborate administrative bureaucracy. In the mid-1930s, however, Japanese national interests began to supersede concern with the welfare of Islanders as the empire began to expand by military action.

The nature of Japanese impact on Micronesia varied geographically. Major factors in social change were immigration by Japanese settlers,

economic development, and government control over local life. All of these increased throughout the period of Japanese colonial control. The greatest changes, significantly transforming local conditions, occurred in the Western Pacific, especially on Saipan and the Marianas, the largest islands, where tens of thousands of Japanese immigrants came to work on sugar plantations owned and run by Japanese. Palau also was much changed by Japan's influence. In the Caroline Islands, the high islands saw immigration, industrial development, urbanization, and extensive government control. Life on smaller atolls in the Caroline and Marshall islands was transformed least by the Japanese colonial presence, though even the smallest had a police detachment and a school, and were visited by Japanese traders, medical personnel, census-takers, and other administrators.

Japanese traders had operated on a small scale throughout Micronesia even during the latter part of the German era. After Japanese takeover both trade and industry developed quickly. By 1920 the Japanese South Seas Trading Company had a monopoly of the ocean trade, and the South Seas Development Company was organizing sugar, marine products, copra production, and phosphate extraction throughout the islands. The expansion of industry, especially sugar production, increased immigration from Japan to the islands--first to Saipan and the Marianas, then to Palau, and eastward through Chuuk and the Central Carolines, to Pohnpei. By the mid-1930s Islanders were outnumbered by Japanese everywhere except in the Eastern Carolines and the Marshall Islands--in 1940, on the eve of the war, 81,000 Japanese lived in the mandated islands compared with about 50,000 Micronesians.

The large-scale immigration of Japanese into the islands coincided with a change in Japan's colonial policy. Until the mid-1920s Japan managed its colonies based on simple segregation of local people and Japanese. Education, for example, consisted of a lower track for colonial people (Taiwanese, Koreans, or Micronesians), and a higher track for Japanese. But as the Japanese home government increasingly came to be influenced by military interests, colonial policy changed. By the late 1920s a theory of "Japanization" was introduced, which aimed to spread Japanese language and customs to local people, encouraging loyalty to Japan. Despite this policy of "assimilation," colonial administrators did not allow local people to expect equal rights with Japanese, or opportunities for self-government or Japanese citizenship. Promotion of "assimilation" was really a form of social control. By the 1930s--as waves of Japanese settlers were pouring into Micronesia--the colonial policy of assimilation was intensified in order to strengthen the empire. The policy increased in strength from then until the end of the war: civil and military administration were constantly emphasizing to Islanders

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(and other Japanese colonial peoples) that they should be loyal Japanese citizens, that they had obligation to the Emperor, and that they should sacrifice and bear the burden of the needs of Japan.

The result of this thirty-year-long educational effort in Micronesia was to build up a store of loyalty toward Japanese. Islanders were aware of the benefits Japan introduced--including opportunities for wage labor, trade, and travel (including travel to Japan), sanitation and health facilities, widespread education, and so on. At the same time Islanders recognized the unequal treatment they received from Japanese; the colonial educational and police system made it clear that Islanders did not have full legal, political, or economic equality with Japanese. For example, Japanese men on Pohnpei could marry island women, but not vice versa. The colonial bureaucracy was strict in its administration of law and control of local life. Gradually, as the war increased pressure on the Japanese military government, the military's harshness toward Micronesians reduced Micronesian goodwill and caused most Islanders to welcome the American invasion.

When the war in the Pacific began, the Japanese government in Micronesia was prepared psychologically and materially to support the advance of Japanese armies in Asia and to defend the empire if necessary. Historians disagree about how extensively the islands were fortified before war was declared. Mark Peattie, reviewing the question recently, argues that there is no good evidence that Japan was preparing for an island war far in advance (1988, 247-251). Instead, he says military construction of harbors, airstrips, and oil storage facilities began in Micronesia two years before Pearl Harbor, and the Fourth Fleet headquartered at Chuuk was only established late in 1939. The construction of military bases was not yet completed at the time of the first victorious Allied invasion in 1944. But Micronesians were affected by the international tension well before the first shots were fired. They lost land, jobs, and a sense of being in control of their islands as ever greater numbers of Japanese immigrants moved to Saipan, the Marianas, and Palau. The military took an increasing interest in colonial administration. German and American Christian missionaries were replaced with Japanese counterparts. Young men worked in prewar construction projects, and everyone was subject to propaganda, economic pressure to help the empire, and the shutdown of contact with the rest of the world.

On the eve of the war, then, we see the Japanese actively preparing for conflict and demanding additional efforts and loyalty from Micronesians. On their part, Islanders were ambivalent: they acknowledged the power and authority of the Japanese and recognized the improvements and opportunities of Japanese rule; but they also saw that they were losing control

of their own lands to Japanese immigrants, and they increasingly resented the harsh discipline and demands of the military presence on the islands.

Prewar history is critical in comparing Micronesian and Melanesian wartime experiences. Of course, the two areas are geographically different, with peoples quite distinct in culture and political organization. Colonial histories also differ, though both populations were largely Christian, and were involved in trade, wage labor, and exposure to foreign ideas in the years before the war. Most notably, though, Micronesia was an integral part of the Japanese empire, and for thirty years Micronesians had been governed, educated, propagandized, and given orders by Japanese. This colonial experience was both positive and negative for Micronesians. Both feelings were expressed during the war.

### **The War**

For most Micronesians the war began with small-scale, local increases in the military presence. Transportation and supply facilities were upgraded; construction of military bases began; the Japanese navy joined small trading ships on the ocean horizons; and Japanese soldiers were billeted on nearly every island. Aside from a few American attacks on the Marshall Islands in early 1942, Micronesia did not experience warfare directly during the first years of the war--until the American invasion came with a vengeance at the beginning of 1944.

From Pearl Harbor in 1941 until 1944 Micronesia played the role of the rest of the "inner empire" surrounding Japan itself: as a support system for the fighting in Asia and in the Southwest Pacific. Chuuk became increasingly important as a base to support the Japanese navy in the Solomon Islands battles, even though the Japanese Navy's great battleships spent much of the war sitting in Chuuk Lagoon, waiting for the "decisive encounter" with the US Pacific Fleet that never came. This waiting period was important in building the American myth of Chuuk as an impregnable fortress, and the idea that Micronesia was fortified to the hilt and would be extremely difficult to attack.

Many books have been written about Japanese and Allied strategy in the Pacific War. To state Micronesia's place in high-level military plans briefly is not simple. From the Japanese viewpoint the empire was a series of concentric circles, with the home islands of Japan at its center. As the war progressed, and the Japanese military shifted from an offensive to a defensive posture, high command continually redrew a "defensive perimeter" that all loyal subjects were commanded to defend. This perimeter was repeatedly narrowed, as Allied forces penetrated closer to the home islands from the east and the south. The Japanese military followed a deliberate policy of

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"letting go" of outer perimeters as it became unfeasible to supply and support them. Japan hoarded its strength for the anticipated final defensive battles; the fighting became more intense as it drew nearer to Japan itself.

On the Allied side, strategy was aimed at reaching Japan as swiftly as possible. By the spring of 1943 Allied resources were sufficient to open a fighting front in the Central Pacific, while continuing the Southwest Pacific offensive. A compromise between army and navy, and among the Allies, provided a plan to open a second "road to Tokyo" by a westward sweep through Micronesia, eventually to link up with Allied forces moving north through the Solomons and New Guinea for the final assault on the Philippines and, if need be, on Japan itself. It remained unclear for several months which Micronesian islands would be attacked, and in what order. Allied high command had little information about the extent and distribution of Japanese strength in the area, and little experience, at first, with amphibious warfare (Morison 1947-1962).

By late 1943 the Japanese navy was short of supplies. Their losses in the defense of the Solomons and the Bismarck Archipelago meant that they could not effectively counter any large-scale central Pacific attack. The commander of the Japanese Fourth Fleet drew a new defensive perimeter, leaving the Gilberts and Marshalls outside of it. They would not be seriously defended, though troops already there were expected to fight to their deaths. Meanwhile Allied naval strategists were choosing their first point of attack on the new Pacific front. The Japanese fleet was based at Chuuk, which seemed well protected by its screen of islands; therefore, the Americans decided to attack the Marshall Islands first. To do that they needed an air base within bombing distance. The Gilbert Islands (now part of Kiribati) were chosen as their first Micronesian target.

### Chronology

The first Allied landings in Micronesia took place in the Gilberts in November 1943, with a massively destructive bombardment and land invasion of Tarawa. The fighting war had come to Micronesia, and from this day on it increased in intensity without pause. After Tarawa, air and surface bombardment of the Marshall Islands began, and continued for two months. Kwajalein was invaded on 31 January 1944; the attack on critical Enewetak was planned for February. In support of these attacks Pohnpei, Kosrae, Wake, and other Marshall Islands were repeatedly shelled and bombed.

In February 1944 the major American strike on Chuuk destroyed 200,000 tons of Japanese shipping. But Admiral Koga had ordered his major warships out of Chuuk two weeks before, pulling them back to Palau, assuming that

eastern Micronesia was lost and intending to hold a new line of defense between the Marianas and the western Carolines. The attack on Chuuk blew up one of the Allies great myths of Japanese power in Micronesia; the Enewetak invasion on the same day cleared the way for the US takeover of the Marshalls.

At that point the Allies decided to "bypass" Pohnpei and Chuuk--that is, to hit them by air and sea attack and "neutralize" them as military bases, but not to make a land invasion. See chapters 8 and 11 for what this meant to people on the islands that were "bypassed" or "neutralized." It did not mean they were out of the war. It did mean that they were cut off from supplies and support from the remaining parts of the empire. Except for a few submarines, which could carry very little, the "bypassed" islands had no access to outside supplies; they were effectively incapable of either offensive or defensive military action; they were subject to air and surface bombardment; and, as the months went by, the people--Japanese and Micronesian--were increasingly concerned simply with staying alive. The military on some islands, it seems, simply abandoned Japanese and Micronesian civilians, leading to a general scramble to avoid starvation.

By the end of February 1944 the United States had taken control of 800,000 square miles of ocean, and forced the effective Japanese resistance back to the extreme western Pacific. Former Japanese bases in the Gilberts and Marshalls were turned into American bases; Japanese were killed or taken prisoner; Islanders were experiencing their first lengthy encounters with Americans (discussed elsewhere in this volume). The US Navy, prepared with civil affairs officers and plans for handling conquered populations, began to organize the next phase of Micronesia's history: the American era (Richard 1957).

Although the central Micronesian islands were not invaded by Americans after the conquest of the Marshalls, they were still in the war. Chuuk, Satawal, Pohnpei, and other islands were repeatedly attacked, and Japanese repeatedly tried to use them as air and submarine bases. Island men were conscripted as labor for the Japanese, sometimes working while bombs were falling. Men and women worked overtime to produce badly needed food and tried to maintain community life under wartime stress. While these central Caroline Islands were "bypassed," the bulk of American military might in the central Pacific was converging on the Marianas, where Saipan had become the chief Japanese headquarters for the central Pacific. The desperate fighting on Saipan and the Marianas is well known to military history; it began on 15 June 1945 with the first attack on Saipan; the battle for Saipan lasted twenty-four days. Guam was invaded on 21 July; Tinian on 24 July. Fighting on all these islands was long and bloody, with great devastation and death for

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people on all sides. Islanders were vastly outnumbered on most of these islands, which had larger civilian Japanese populations. The final days of the war in the western Pacific were marked by horror for civilians, culminating in the mass suicides of Japanese civilians on Saipan. But the Allied conquest of the Marianas meant that American planes could now reach the Japanese mainland with their bombs, and the end of the war was in sight.

The end of the war in the Micronesian islands came on 30 August 1945 when Japan's South Sea Island forces made their official surrender in Chuuk. During the next months Japanese were repatriated, leaving Islanders with their new administrators, the American navy. The war in the Pacific was over. But for Micronesians the meaning and the memory of the war would never end.

### **The Impacts of the War**

Although American, European, and Japanese historians have produced voluminous documentation of Western and Asian experiences of the Pacific theater of World War II, they seldom include information about the effects of wartime operations on local people. Most Micronesian memories of the war are preserved in songs and stories, which are only now being collected to give us detailed knowledge of daily life during the war, and the impact of Japanese colonial and military activity, large-scale conflict, and initial American occupation on Islanders. I can only outline some of the most significant and lasting impacts of the wartime era, and briefly compare Micronesian experiences with those of Melanesia.

Wartime experiences varied considerably among the island groups of Micronesia. The Marshall Islands lay at the eastern periphery of the Japanese empire; they were the springboards for Japan's early attacks on the United States and were the site of the first American attacks on the Japanese. Marshall Islanders were also the first Micronesians to experience the new American colonial policies. Pohnpei, in the Eastern Carolines, held an important seaplane base and a large Japanese urban area. After Pohnpei was cut off from the Japanese empire by American forces, people there had to intensify local agricultural production, and they suffered shortages of imported manufactured goods such as cloth. On nearby Kosrae numerous Japanese and Islanders were relocated to a labor camp, where they had to remain when communication with the empire was cut off. The populations far exceeded Kosrae's agricultural capacity, so that starvation and sickness set in. Chuuk and Yap, which shared similar economic and social wartime stresses, were more prominent in Japanese military plans. Yap held a seaplane base; Chuuk Lagoon was a major naval base, home to the Japanese combined fleet



until the American conquest of the Marshall Islands. Japanese air and submarine attacks were launched from Chuuk and Yap as late as the US invasion of Saipan (June 1944). The central and eastern Caroline Islands were subject to American attack throughout this period. After the Japanese gave up the defense of the eastern islands, Palau, the Marianas, and Saipan were reinforced heavily with army and navy forces, making them the eye of the war hurricane: on these islands physical destruction and human suffering were most intense.

Physically the war changed the face of all the islands. Japanese and Islanders had invested much effort and money in the construction of harbors, airports, cities, electricity-generating plants, and local industries--all were destroyed. Under the administration of the US Navy new systems of employment and trade had to be established. Medical care, education, and government services had to be built up again.

Other aspects of life also changed as a result of the war. Women had a greater role in work and in leadership while men were away from home; they brought these wartime experiences back to their families and peacetime lives. Young men had traveled more widely than their fathers; they had met people from other parts of the Pacific; and they came home with new ideas and aspirations. The great material wealth displayed by both sides, especially by Americans, suggested to Islanders a new standard of economic and industrial potential. Unlike Melanesians, for whom encounters with American troops were a brief interlude, Micronesians were about to begin a lengthy relationship with the United States.

### **Comparisons with Melanesia**

Many of the impacts of the war affected Micronesians and Melanesians similarly. Both suffered the danger and destruction of bombardment from Allies (Micronesians were less subject to Japanese attack). Some Micronesian men, like Melanesians, served in combat, including volunteers who served in the Japanese Army far from home in Southeast Asia and New Guinea. Most adult men worked as conscripted labor for the Japanese, and some moved from island to island as they were ordered. Other men, women, and young people carried on at home, laboring overtime to produce food and other necessities not only for themselves, but also for Japanese. For all Pacific Islanders the major stresses of the war were danger, starvation, absence from or loss of family, social dislocation, and population movement.

But though both Micronesia and Melanesia were key strategic areas in the Pacific War, people in the two regions experienced the war in very different ways. These differences are due to traditional cultural and social

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distinctions, the degree of direct involvement with occupying forces, the nationality of occupying forces, and even differences between army and navy approaches to civilian populations. Micronesians had lived under Japanese rule for thirty years when the navy-led American invasion changed their world in a matter of months. Melanesians, who had been living under various European colonial governments, were caught in intense back-and-forth fighting between Japanese and Allied forces. After the war, control of many Micronesian islands was demanded and achieved by the US military for security reasons, with many islands placed under navy control. Melanesia, again divided among the colonial powers (who had economic, as well as strategic, uses for the region), experienced a diversity of postwar policy impacts. Micronesians saw the end of the war as a change to a new era; American administration changed almost every aspect of political and economic life. Melanesians found that the British, French, and Australians who returned to their colonies after the war wanted to return to "life as usual." These returning colonialists were met by Melanesians who had seen a wider world and developed new ideas, which they wanted to translate into new ways of life. Postwar political activity, then, was quite different in the two regions, although populations in both regions have achieved political independence.

### Conclusion

With the end of the war in the Pacific came the end of Japanese colonial administration in Micronesia. It was hard to predict what the future would hold. Americans had mixed feelings about their new island possessions. On the one hand they wanted firm control of military bases in Micronesia, and they wanted the loyalty of Micronesian people. On the other hand the United States believed in self-government and did not want to be seen as a colonial power. The administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands developed within this double set of American intentions. The modern outcome of the American military conquest of Micronesia, as we see today, is Micronesian independence, with a variety of special relationships with the United States.

I have provided a very broad outline of the context of Micronesian experiences of the war years. Following chapters take up specifics of what life was like for people who lived through that time--people who have given us their memories, so that we too can learn about it.

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