

Chapter Fifteen

Nagai Ryūtarō: “Holy War for the Reconstruction of Asia,” 1937

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On 14 October 1937, Nagai Ryūtarō, party politician and communications minister in the cabinet of Prince Konoe Fumimaro (see II:15 for details on Nagai and I:32 on Konoe), gave a speech on the “Holy War for the Reconstruction of Asia.” Nagai characterized Japan’s invasion of China as a noble effort to establish peace in East Asia by destroying a Nationalist regime that served the interests of Western imperialism and drummed up anti-Japanese sentiment while ignoring the threat posed to the region by the spread of communism. He also raised the stakes of the conflict by linking it to a Japanese national mission to create a more just and fraternal international order in Asia and, indeed, in the world at large. Speaking two months prior to the fall of Nanking (Nanjing), Nagai essentially outlined the pan-Asian definition of the war that would be made official through policy statements released by the Konoe cabinet during 1938 (see II:17). Likewise, Nagai gave his talk at the inauguration of the “Campaign for National Spiritual Mobilization” (*kokumin seishin sōdōin undō*), a government-directed undertaking that incorporated pan-Asian rhetoric into ever-expanding efforts to elicit popular support for national mobilization and total war.

In November 1937, the Cabinet Information Bureau appended the text of Nagai’s speech to a pamphlet on “Preservation of Resources and the Cooperation of the People in Finance and Economics in the Period of Crisis” (*Shigen no aigo to hijōji zaiseikeizai e no kokumin no kyōryoku*), presenting both as reference sources for disseminating “awareness of current affairs.” The following document is a translation of approximately two-thirds of Nagai’s speech as printed in this pamphlet.

Source (translation from the Japanese original by Roger H. Brown)
Nagai Ryūtarō, "Ajia saiken no seisen" (Holy War for the Reconstruction of Asia). *Nihon Bunka* 10 (November 1937), 27–42.

Today . . . at the launching of the campaign for national spiritual mobilization, I join with all of you . . . participating in this profound national movement. As one who believes in the mission of the Japanese people, explaining our vital role in facilitating the opportunity for Asia's ascendance is a task after my own heart. . . . The purpose of this war is to crush the Nanking Government [of Chiang Kai-shek] and all anti-Japanese resistance forces that support that regime and that, ignoring the joint mission of Japan and China for Oriental Peace (*Tōyō heiwa*), are attempting to expel Japan from China. In addition to realizing the spiritual and powerful union of the peoples of Japan and China who share this ideal of constructing a newly emergent Asia, it is clearly true that the purpose of the war rests in the establishment of eternal peace in the Orient. Although wars are common in the world, I believe just and fair motivation such as that which lies behind our current dispatch of troops to China is exceptional. On the occasion of opening the Seventy-second Diet Session, His Majesty proclaimed, "Our soldiers are sweeping aside all obstacles and through their fidelity and bravery will spur reflection on the part of Republican China and rapidly bring about none other than the establishment of peace in East Asia." Likewise, Prime Minister Konoe has on numerous occasions in the Diet declared that "what our country seeks in China is not territory but partnership." In short, what the Japanese people desire dearly is that the Chinese people return to their true Asian mind, through alliance with Japan establish Oriental Peace, and, via the establishment of Oriental Peace, contribute to world peace and the welfare of humanity. Among foreigners there are those who look at this war and viciously attack what they see as Japan's territorial ambitions in China—but if there are those who see in our contemporary dispatch of forces to China an action the same as England's earlier Opium War [1839–1842] . . . to forcefully import opium into China, or Russia's use of the Boxer Rising [1900] to plot the occupation of Manchuria . . . well, to put it in a nutshell, those people are exposing their own ignorance.

Reflecting back on the period after the Great War, one sees that the weak peoples of the world who were oppressed by the military and financial strength of the Great Powers responded to the great postwar collapse of that strength by raising flags of revolt, and that there arose suddenly a fierce current bearing their efforts to achieve self-liberation from imperialist control, brutal oppression, and exploitation and to thereby construct independent new states. The oppressed peoples of our Asian continent also moved to the

fore by declaring independence and abandoning unequal treaties. As fellow Asians we Japanese cannot repress heartfelt feelings of respect at the addition of these glorious new pages to the history of Asia. However, at this very moment China . . . submits before the imperialist hegemony of foreign countries that differ from China and its cultural system. What is this ugly state of affairs whereby the Bolshevization and colonization of all of China is ignored? Upon consideration, one sees that this is the result of the Nanking Government and the Chinese ruling classes connected with it being blinded by their desire to maintain political power and, in order to do so, unhesitatingly colluding with any and all foreign powers. The existence of such a government is China's one great shame. The establishment of Oriental Peace is the consistent national policy of Japan, and if people truly desire to work for the establishment of Oriental Peace, they will strengthen the partnership of the peoples of Japan, Manchukuo and China, countries that are Asian and that share a common culture, and establish the grand principle of mutual aid in national defense and industry. There is no other path than to resist stoutly those foreign powers bearing ambitions to dominate Asia and to construct for Japan, Manchukuo and China a New World of co-prosperity that is absolutely devoid of exploitation. Therefore, our dispatch of troops to China is part of a war of Asian reconstruction aimed at eradicating the anti-Asian and anti-independence ideology of slavery of a Nanking Government that is working to reject and hinder the realization of this grand ideal.

Japan, reflecting its long-standing position of leadership in Asia, has exerted itself fully to aid China in building a new country independent and autonomous. In Peiping [present Beijing], at the opening of the Conference on Tariff Reform, Japan led the nations of the world in endeavoring to recognize Chinese tariff autonomy. Likewise, at the Commission on Repealing Extraterritoriality, Japan exerted tremendous effort to improve China's position and, already full of sympathy, looked forward eagerly to the day when China would be reborn as a unified state. Nevertheless, the Nanking Government not only fails to understand Japan's true intentions, they moreover use anti-Japanism as a means to unify China and preserve their own power. . . . This vehement cultivation of hatred for Japan among all Chinese is truly an outrage that will destroy the foundation for Oriental Peace. The existence of such a government is completely incompatible with the idea of world peace. As a consequence, in recent years the trend toward viewing Japan as the enemy has spread throughout China [and incidents of anti-Japanese violence have escalated]. . . . On average there is a victim every four days, with the climax being reached in this July's incident at the Marco Polo Bridge [the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937]. . . . Under these circumstances, resolutely and fearlessly striking a crushing blow against the Nanking Government and

its military, thus depriving them completely of fighting spirit, and explaining thoroughly effective ways for preventing any repeat of such untoward incidents, comprise Japan's mission for world peace and, at the same time, are an exercise of the Japanese people's inevitable right of self-defense.

However, the target Japan aims to strike is the Nanking Government and its military which continue implementing mistaken policies of anti-Japanese resistance—in no way is it the Chinese people. We of course bear no enmity toward the Chinese people; if anything, we cannot suppress our limitless sympathy for the Chinese people who, being oppressed by the Nanking Government and the foreign powers that pull its strings, even now are unable to achieve the true independence they so desire. . . . As Japanese, no matter what long-term resistance we confront, so long as the objectives of the Emperor's campaigning forces remain unattained, we must—with weapons in hand and with an uncompromising, indomitable and dauntless spirit—be resolved to continue the advance. For this reason, as well as so as not to cause anxiety in the minds of those officers and men on the front lines, those on the home front must also exert themselves to the utmost in their respective posts. All the people must arise and each and every one must awaken to the grand historical mission of the Japanese Empire and work to fulfill their duties on the home front. At the time of the Great War, Germany was surrounded at its borders by some two million enemy troops yet continued fighting for five long years and never allowed one enemy soldier to set foot on German soil, something at which the world truly marveled. Under those circumstances, the strenuous efforts of Germans on the home front and their vigorous determination to sacrifice their lives for their country were in no way inferior to that of German soldiers on the battlefield. . . . Today the Japanese government, in order to comfort the families of deployed soldiers and raise public bonds, is seeking ardently the cooperation of Japanese on the home front in reducing unnecessary expenses, curtailing overseas payments by limiting consumption of foreign goods, and preserving domestic resources with military uses by encouraging the use of substitute goods. Should the home front efforts of the Japanese people, who have been trained to lead through the grand spirit of patriotic devotion over the course of three thousand years, prove inferior to the German people in zeal, exertion and cooperation, the Japanese people would themselves bring shame upon Japanese culture. . . . Before the great purpose of national survival we must discard the narrow matters of the self and display our resolve to work for the greater good. Similarly, those Japanese on the home front through whose veins courses that grand spirit of patriotic devotion must teach the entire world that they are the equal of our officers and men fighting gallantly at the front. Ever since the occurrence of this incident, it is the brave and righteous actions of the officers and men of

our army and navy on battlefields in north, central, and southern China that continue to surprise the world. Indeed, it is our national character tempered over three thousand years that, in the face of national crisis, emits a unique brilliance, and I believe it is on account of this unrivaled Japanese spirit that we display such profound *esprit* before the world. . . . In order to accomplish the task bequeathed by our ancestors we must exert ourselves strenuously so as to feel no shame before them, add yet more pages to the brilliant history of the glorious Japanese Empire, cultivate even more splendidly our proud national character, and feel keenly our heavy responsibility to pass this on to later generations. Should there be among Japanese charged with defending the home front those who do not awaken to this grave responsibility, who neglect their indispensable home-front duty to console the minds of officers and men giving their all at the front, and who begrudge cooperating with the current national campaign to realize Japan's historic mission in the world, one must say that such people relinquish their special rights as Japanese. When their time comes to die, I think they will be utterly unable to face our brave ancestors.

The point is that this war is not just the fight of the government, nor is it just the fight of the army and navy—truly it is the fight of all Japanese for the purpose of realizing the country's grand foundational ideal of *hakkō ichiu* ("the eight corners of the world under one roof") and a new world of human fraternity. Many will probably agree that the greatest source of instability in the world today is the widespread impoverishment accompanying the monopolization of resources in the international arena and the Bolshevik revolutionary schemes that, taking advantage of the resulting inequality and dissatisfaction, are being carried out around the globe. There is only one moral path that will liberate all of humanity from this global insecurity, reconstruct economic relations between nations on the basis of international justice, and lead to a world wherein all territory, capital, and labor are mobilized for the stable livelihood of all humanity. Namely, it is the moral mission of the Japanese people to carry forth the leadership principles for world reconstruction and, not just in the Orient but throughout the world, fight against exclusionism and communism. Therefore, this war—that is to say, Japan's eradication of exclusionist, communist forces in China—is truly the first step toward the grand moral and historical mission of realizing throughout the world *hakkō ichiu* and the great ideal of human fraternity.