

Phi Alpha Theta Pacific Northwest Conference, 8–10 April 2021

Jared Kimball, Brigham Young University-Idaho, undergraduate student, “World War II and Racial Relations”

Abstract: The world has a long history of racial bias and discrimination. Many countries see racial equality as a primary concern that needs to be addressed. Countries including the United States, United Kingdom, and even India have made major leaps in the past century to address racial equality. This process was started by the leaders of nations actively involved in World War II. World War II was a war started by racial prejudice and changed mankind’s perceptions of race. In this essay I explain how World War II was a precursor for the American Civil Rights Movement and for worldwide change in attitudes about race. This change included the end of racial segregation, as well as decolonization. This is an important topic to me and I believe that the contribution by leaders of World War II to advance the rights of non-European peoples are often overlooked.

Jared Kimball

World War II and Racial Relations

Brigham Young University – Idaho

Undergraduate

This paper will argue that the leaders of the allies' views on non-white races improved throughout the course of World War II. This paper will not argue that different races gained acceptance by society or that they gained equal rights, but simply that World War II made major contributions to the legal advancements of human races that were not white. We often think of Hitler, the Nazis and the ideas of the Aryan race when we bring up race in World War II. Race, however, is not quite that simple. In the 1940s, human race was a broad term that included skin color, ethnic groups, and even some religious groups. This idea that any race was superior to another was a dangerous and false concept that had major ramifications for racial relations spanning the next few decades all the way to today. This paper will cover the racial relations around the world during World War II and show evidence as to how this tragic war improved its leaders' views on these relations.

Race was not always about skin color. Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, etc were all considered different races. These racial concepts carried over from years of imperialism. The racial concepts around imperialism are important to World War II. During this time the British Empire still controls the Indian subcontinent, South and East Africa, as well as maintaining a degree of autonomy over Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The French control West Africa and Indochina, and the Dutch control Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> These territories are important because the European powers see themselves as superior to their colonies. The European's superiority complex manifested itself in the form of forced colonial military service. These countries also denied people in the colonies decent jobs and treated them as subhuman.

European countries were not the only ones that still maintained a degree of superiority over other races at this time. In 1941, the United States went to war with the axis powers to fight

---

<sup>1</sup> Meeting between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Vyacheslav Molotov, June 1, 1942, *Major Problems in the History of World War II*, (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), 187.

for democracy and to end discrimination overseas. While the United States was fighting discrimination overseas, racism and other persecutions persisted at home. African-Americans at the time could not get decent wages or union cards.<sup>2</sup> African-Americans also dealt with segregation in all aspects of life in the form of Jim Crow Laws. Jim Crow Laws also applied to the US military, which upset African Americans greatly. Many African Americans wanted the opportunity to serve their country and fight in World War II and the military Jim Crow laws prevented them from doing so.

World War II turned out to be a time for African Americans to gain more rights and opportunities. Millions of white Americans served in Europe and the Pacific during the war. While they were away, many factories needed workers for the war effort. African Americans were able to fill the spots needed for jobs in factories that had been traditionally jobs for whites. Detroit was the national center of the auto industry and its factories alone employed over 150,000 African Americans during the war.<sup>3</sup> President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an order in 1941 that banned unions and companies that were contributing to the war effort from discriminating when hiring African Americans.<sup>4</sup> The US government encouraged these black and white workers to cooperate during World War II.<sup>5</sup> In 1943, The government even released a propaganda poster showing a black worker and a white worker working in a factory together with an American flag in the background. The poster was titled “united we win.” If white

---

<sup>2</sup> A. Philip Randolph, A Call to March on Washington, 1941, *Major Problems* (Rockville, Maryland: Transportation Communications Union, 1941), 213.

<sup>3</sup> *LIFE Magazine*, *Detroit is Dynamite*, August 17, 1942, *Major Problems* (New York: LIFE Magazine, 1943), 217.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Executive Order 8802: *Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry*, 1941, US National Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Liberman, 1943, *United We Win*, *Major Problems* (D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1943), 55.

authorities in the government had racial prejudices, they were willing to set them aside for the war effort.

African Americans made advancements in rights in the military in addition to advancements in the workforce. The advancement we all know about was when Harry S. Truman desegregated the US military in 1948, but the advancements went back much further than this. In 1942, President Roosevelt sent a document to the navy telling them not to discriminate against black sailors or “colored seamen” as he called them. African Americans were even given their own fighter squadron called the Tuskegee Airman. They were even given intelligence on the enemy, which shows that the government trusted them enough to put them into the war effort.

World War II was also a civil rights movement in itself. In 1941, many African Americans called for a march on Washington. Their demands included desegregation of the armed forces and an executive order from the President requiring military-related businesses to stop discriminating against hiring blacks. They marched on not just Washington, but also city halls and councils.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, these African Americans organizing the protests also called for non-violence. These events and protests during World War II would become precursors for the better known Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

African Americans were not the only minorities in the United States to experience discrimination during this time. Many Mexican Americans crossed the border into the United States between 1914 and 1929.<sup>7</sup> They experienced racial segregation similar to blacks in schools, playgrounds, theaters and swimming pools. In addition to segregation, many worked in low paying jobs like railroads, desert mines, and farms. Many Mexican Americans were

---

<sup>6</sup> A. Philip Randolph, 1941, A Call to March on Washington, *Major Problems* (Rockville, Maryland: Transportation Communications Union, 1941), 213.

<sup>7</sup> No author, June 21, 1943, Zoot Suits and Service Stripes: Race Tensions Behind the Riots, *Major Problems* (New York: Newsweek Inc. 1943) 222-224.

discriminated against by Americans which made them band together into gangs. These gangs wore something called zoot suits. The police targeted Mexicans wearing zoot suits and the Los Angeles government even banned them altogether in 1943. Most of the Mexican Americans who wore “zoot suits” were not allowed to fight in the military because they were considered “unfit.”

The US government later took a better view of Mexican Americans in 1943. Many Mexican Americans were drafted into the military. The US army leadership later called Mexican American soldiers topnotch soldiers and said they were the first soldiers ready to fight at the battle of Bataan.<sup>8</sup> The US government also declared that all the races of the world have come to America to obtain freedom and now they were going off to fight for it. They even praised the Mexicans who grew food for the war effort in Texas and California and publicly mentioned that 1 out of every 2 Mexican males contributed to the war effort.

The US government seemed to also have a particular bias against Chinese people. The US allowed Time Magazine to print papers saying that Japanese and Chinese are both the same race. It goes on to say several stereotypes about Chinese. These stereotypes include those that say the Chinese are tall, fat, can not grow a mustache and have farther apart eyes than Japanese.<sup>9</sup> In 1942, President Roosevelt was not sure that he wanted China to be a part of the post-war alliance. Roosevelt stated in a meeting with Molotov that at the absolute least the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union would be part of the post-war alliance and China was only a possibility.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> The Government Praises Spanish-Speaking Americans in the War Effort, 1943, *Major Problems* (Washington DC: Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, 1943), 220.

<sup>9</sup> How To Tell Your Friends From The Japs, 1941, Time Magazine, *ibid*, 216.

<sup>10</sup> Meeting between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Vyacheslav Molotov, June 1, 1942, *Major Problems* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), 187.

By 1943, President Roosevelt seemed to have changed his mind on the Chinese.

Roosevelt said that the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek believed the Indochinese were unfit for self-government and needed a joint system with China for at least the next 20 years.<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt agreed with China and said he believed China should support Indochina over returning it to France.<sup>12</sup> Roosevelt had shown preference to majority-white countries in the past, so the fact that he sided with China over France (a white country) in a major issue like governing an entire region of the world showed that he had gained great respect for China over the course of the war. In 1944, US General Joseph Stilwell sent a letter to his wife about the Chinese.<sup>13</sup> He said that while he struggled to replace 10,000 men, the Chinese sacrificed 300,000 men without blinking an eye. He called it tragic and wondered what the American public would think about it. He also said that the British took their time to send help and did not really care about Chinese sacrifices and just wanted Hong Kong back. This US general gained a positive view of the Chinese and was sad that they sacrificed so many people.

The US government also discriminated against Japanese Americans during the war. In February 1942, President Roosevelt ordered Japanese Americans to be stripped of their property and taken from their homes to internment camps on the west coast.<sup>14</sup> The US government believed that Americans of Japanese descent would be more loyal to their home country of Japan than to the United States. The government believed that this loyalty would lead many to become spies for Japan. This same thing had happened to German Americans in World War I and now it

---

<sup>11</sup> Meeting between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Marshall Stalin at the Tehran Conference, November 28th, 1943, *ibid*, 188.

<sup>12</sup> Meeting between Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Ambassador Halifax, January 24th, 1944, *ibid*, 188-189.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Stilwell to Mrs. Stilwell, September 21, 1944, *The Stilwell Papers, Major Problems* (New York: William Sloan Associates, 1948), 185-186.

<sup>14</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt Orders Executive Order No. 9066, February 19, 1942, *Major Problems* (Washington D.C.: Federal Register 7, no. 38, 1942), 56-57.

was happening again to other people who had ancestry from America's enemies. This was not entirely a race issue, but Japanese Americans' had many different features from white Americans that made them stand out and easier to find. One Japanese American named Miskiso Hane recalled the internment camps being "oppressively hot," overcrowded and surrounded with guards and barbed wire.<sup>15</sup> He recalled one US General at the camps saying that a Jap is a Jap and that there was no difference between Japanese Americans and the Japanese people they fought against. Many Japanese Americans even joined the army to get out of internment.

When the war was over, 65% of the Japanese that the US government had rounded up were American citizens.<sup>16</sup> Japanese Americans' situation later improved after the war was over. Congress passed and the Japanese Americans evacuation claims Act of 1948.<sup>17</sup> This act reimbursed over 24,000 Japanese Americans who were put in internment camps. These acts reimbursed them for money and property. The US government reimbursing Japanese Americans so soon after the war shows that they knew they made a mistake and discrimination against a certain group was not justifiable.

Immigrants also faced an especially hard time during World War II. Americans had always discriminated against Immigrants in the United States, but the decades leading up to World War II were especially hard. In 1924, The US government passed the National Origins Restriction Act. This act replaced the previous act of 1890.<sup>18</sup> The current version allowed 3% of citizens of a certain country whose people were already in the United States into the United

---

<sup>15</sup> Misiko Hane, September 1990, Wartime Internment, *Major Problems* (New York: Journal of American History 7 no. 2), 227-230.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, 228.

<sup>17</sup> Harry S. Truman, Resolution Regarding the Evacuation Claims of 1948, Last modified 2009, last accessed April 10, 2020, Online Archive of California (oac.cdlib.org, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> US National Origins Act, 1924, National Origins Act Restricts Immigration, *Major Problems in the History of World War II*, (Washington D.C.: United States Statutes at Large, 1925), 324.

States. For example, if there were 1,000 Irish Americans then only 30 people from Ireland could enter the US each year. The current version was also using the 1920 census. The new 1924 version only allowed 2% and used the 1890 census. The government's goal was to keep immigrants from Ireland, Italy, Eastern Europe, and Asia out of the country. The US government saw these people as racially and religiously inferior. Many of these people were Catholic and the US government wanted to keep the country as a Protestant majority.

Immigrants had a hard life in the United States during this time, but they were also able to get jobs with decent wages. An article in Detroit mentioned that Its production improved greatly during this time.<sup>19</sup> The article mentioned that over half of Detroit's two million people were immigrants, and that their unions were still fighting with Ford motors for better treatment. Detroit's wartime production rose from \$1.4 million in the first six months to over \$12 million the next year. These factors seemed to point out that immigrants' status was getting better since they made up over half the Detroit workforce, their unions were still fighting for their wages and rights and their production increased six-fold. These immigrants were mostly Polish, Ukrainian, German, Yugoslav, Italian and Syrian. These immigrants were from places the government did not want immigrants coming from, and this shows that the government may have become more accepting of immigrants who were willing to help with the war effort.

The Nazis' persecution of Jews in the Holocaust is perhaps the most well-known event of persecution in World War II. The Nazis killed over six million Jews during the war. However, the Nazis were not the only ones who persecuted Jews during this time. Dearborn Independent, a newspaper published by Ford Motors in 1921-22 said that Jews were lazy, unpatriotic,

---

<sup>19</sup> *LIFE Magazine, Detroit is Dynamite*, August 17, 1942, *Major Problems* (New York: LIFE Magazine, 1943), 218

communists that only cared about money.<sup>20</sup> This may have been published by a newspaper, but it reflected the attitude Americans had toward Jews at this time. Polls taken at the time also showed that Americans did not have positive feelings about Jews. The US government took a poll in 1938 asking Americans what they thought about taking in Jews fleeing persecution from the Nazis. 77% of Americans said no, that they should not allow any more Jews into the United States.<sup>21</sup>

The US government did not have a favorable view of Jews either at the beginning of World War II. In 1939, The St. Louis, a boat with Jews escaping Nazi Germany attempted to enter the United States. The US government turned them away. Cuba also turned them away and forced them to return to Germany.<sup>22</sup> In addition to not allowing Jews into the United States, the US State Department suppressed news of the Holocaust.<sup>23</sup> In 1942, the US state department received news from the World Jewish Congress that Hitler was attempting to exterminate all the Jews. The State Department responded by saying that the information received was only “alleged” and that it seemed too unrealistic to be true and proceeded to do nothing.

The US government and the public started to change their minds when information started to come in on the horrors of the Holocaust. In 1944, the Polish Underground gave one of the first eye witness accounts of the “Final Solution.” Jan Karski, a Polish resistance soldier described what he saw as dead bodies mixed in with horse manure, barbed wire fences with

---

<sup>20</sup> Henry Ford, 1921-1922, Dearborn Independent Reveals American Anti-Semitism, *ibid*, 324.

<sup>21</sup> Hadley Cantril, 1938-1945, Public Opinion Polls Reveal American Attitudes About Jews in Europe, *Major Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 327.

<sup>22</sup> Refugee Ship, 1939, The New York Times Reports on the St. Louis Tragedy, *Major Problems* (New York: New York Times, 1939), 330.

<sup>23</sup> Meeting between Mr. Gerhart of the US State Department and Mr. Riegner of World Jewish Congress, 1942, The State Department Receives and Suppresses News of the “Final Solution,” *Major Problems* (Washington DC: National Archives, 1990), 335.

armed guards all around and Jews screaming and crying all around.<sup>24</sup> He also saw Nazis packing and boarding Jews onto trains, shooting them, and worst of all, burning them in furnaces. The Nazis committed atrocities that are all too familiar-sounding to us today. We learned about them in history class growing up, but in 1944, these atrocities were not widely known by the world. In 1944, the Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. talked to Roosevelt about the State Department's covering up of the Holocaust and their negligence to act.<sup>25</sup> The Holocaust's atrocities later changed US leaders' minds on the status of Jews. This is evidenced in the creation of Israel. The British mandate of Palestine was split into two countries, one being Israel, a land especially for the Jews. US President Harry S. Truman was one of only two world leaders, with the other being Stalin at the time that recognized Israel as a country.<sup>26</sup>

The British and the Indians were other groups who had racial issues during and after World War II. India was a British colony for hundreds of years. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was originally against Indian Independence and believed Indians to be an inferior race. In 1935, Churchill called Indians rascals, rogues and freebooters. He also said that they were silly and would ruin their country with political squabbles. He even said Indians were unintelligent and would tax air and water.<sup>27</sup> Yet, just twelve years later in 1947, India gained independence. So what changed?

---

<sup>24</sup> Jan Karski of the Polish Underground, 1942-1944, Polish Underground Eyewitness of the "Final Solution," *Major Problems*, (New York: Polish Death Camp, Collier's, 1944), 331.

<sup>25</sup> Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1944, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. Denounces State Department Behavior to Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Major Problems* (New York: Garland 1990), 338.

<sup>26</sup> David Cloud, Harry Truman Recognizes the State of Israel, May 14, 1948, *Way of Life Literature*, last accessed April 10, 2020, ([www.wayoflife.org](http://www.wayoflife.org)).

<sup>27</sup> Winston Churchill To Mahatma Gandhi, 1935, The Churchill Project, Hillsdale College, last accessed April 10 2020, ([winstonchurchill.hillsdale.edu](http://winstonchurchill.hillsdale.edu)).

Over 2.5 million Indian soldiers fought against the axis powers in World War II.<sup>28</sup> The Indian military in World War II was the largest all-volunteer military force in the history of the world.<sup>29</sup> The Indian army contributed to the allies in all theatres of war. Many people speculated that the massive size of the Indian army was one of the major reasons the allies won the war. Not long after the war, Churchill changed his views on Indian independence. In 1947, Winston Churchill sent a letter to the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee.<sup>30</sup> In the letter, Churchill supported Indian Independence and said that the official document must be more specific so that the Indians knew that they were governing themselves.

These changes even affect racial policies in the modern day. Many countries like France, Germany, India, and Japan do not ask questions about race on their censuses. Many of these countries hope that not asking about racial information will help avoid another Holocaust situation. These countries also hope that it will lead to greater equality and help more ethnicities of people be seen as members of that country rather than as a different race. Avoiding numbers about race is also a strategy to avoid population segregation and many countries hope that it will increase diversity.

World War II was a truly global war that involved nearly every nation. People who were previously seen as racially inferior fought for nearly all of the European powers in World War II. This was not enough to win them equal rights with whites, but it did set the stage. Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and Eastern Europeans were all part of the groups that contributed to the war effort and demanded to be treated as equals. World War II was the beginning of the end for things like segregation and colonization. Its victories and consequences shaped the world we

---

<sup>28</sup> No author, World War II Database, 2017, India In World War II, last accessed April 10, 2020, (ww2db.com).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Winston Churchill to British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, July, 1947, Churchill Archives For Schools, last accessed April 10, 2020, (churchillarchiveforschools.com).

live in today. The events that were launched by World War II included the American Civil Rights movement and the decolonization of Asia and Africa.