ZELEK Sebastian 10/02/2014

History – Geography essay

“To what extent did US intervention in 1941 change the nature of the conflict in the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45?”

The Sino-Japanese war originates from a growing hostility between Japan and China since the beginning of XXth century. Both reacted differently to the subjugation by the Western powers, and after the 1st World War Japan becomes vastly stronger than China. That moment of superiority fuelled the traditional Sino-Japanese rivalry, and lead Japan to transform their superiority, coming from being a modernised country while China isn't, into a dominance over China. In 1931 Japan invades Manchuria, and encouraged by the lack of resistance coming from the Chinese, forces China into giving up more and more power to the Japanese. But in 1937, after the “Double Seventh” incident, China decides that it will tolerate no longer the Japanese inference and declares total war. The war that lasted until 1945 saw at first the Chinese attempting to fight the Japanese alone, but after USA's intervention it saw itself being dragged into a conflict on a much bigger scale: the 2nd World War.

While it was fighting alone, China didn't met much success during the war. The Chinese found themselves faced by a modern, professional Japanese army that left Chinese troops without much chance to fight back: during the 37-41 period China lost very quickly their hold of the eastern seaboard. When China saw what they were up against, the war began to be much more chaotic on the Chinese end: Chinese troops largely ignored open battles with the Japanese army, due to the Japanese superior military strength, and resolved mainly to guerilla tactics. Meanwhile, China fell part by part, partially trying to resist the Japanese war machine, partially trying to appease it, showing that no one had a clear idea on how to respond to this threat. And even if the main forces in China, the GMD and the CCP, created a new United Front to respond to the Japanese advances, they could never truly act as a united fighting force: Chiang Kaishek's hate towards the Communists was so strong that even when his country is invaded, he still tries to crush the Reds. But the United Front's involvement in the war managed to create some resistance to the Japanese threat, mainly from the CCP. The main example of the Chinese resistance was the “100 Regiments Offensive”, CCP's initiative to retake some of the territory taken by the Japanese. Around 400,000 CCP lead troops engaged in a campaign aiming to conquer back the lost territory and sabotage the local infrastructure in the territory occupied by the Japanese. The initial result was a two-month successful campaign resulting in a number of Japanese garrisons overrun and around 600 miles of railway line destroyed alongside the extensive damage to roads, bridges and canals. But the Chinese resistance was heavily punished: as an answer to the “100 Regiment Offensive”, the Japanese responded with the “three alls” campaign: “Kill all, Burn all, Loot all”. A campaign of terror inscribed in the most recognisable theme of the Sino-Japanese conflict: the Japanese brutality in China. After the easy conquest of the Chinese territory, Japanese troops were confirmed in their belief that they were the “superior race”, and that they were entitled to treat those they defeated with total contempt. Throughout the whole conflict, the Chinese suffered severe brutalisation from the hands of the Japanese, main example being the rape of Nanjing in 1937. After a heated resistance, Nanjing was captured by the Japanese forces and were commanded by their commander “to kill all captives”. That command ensued a month-long programme of murder and terror, effectively slaughtering 300,000 Chinese, giving no regards to their gender and age. 20,000 girls and women were serially raped by the Japanese troops, then bayoneted to death. Half of the city was burned down. And it is just an example of what was happening throughout China, as a retaliation to the resistance given by the Chinese.

On 7th December 1941, the Sino-Japanese war was dragged into a conflict of a much bigger scale: the 2nd World War. On that day, the Japanese air forces launched the “Operation Tora Tora”, a surprise attack on the USA's Pacific fleet stationed in Pearl Harbor, provoking the US to declare war on Japan. From now on, Japan found itself fighting on two fronts: 1st beeing China, a country too vast to be conquered, and on the 2nd was the Pacific, where Japanese forces were vastly outclassed by the USA's military power. At the time, Japan thinked that they will be able to quickly attack US territories in the Pacific, and oblige the American government to make peace on Japanese terms. But it didn't come out as planned, and in fact, on that day, Japan signed their defeat. The US quickly engaged the Japanese forces in the Pacific, and began aiding China in their struggle against the occupiers. The Lend-Lease act gave China American money, American advisers and American weaponry. This aid given by the USA vastly encouraged the Chinese in their effort to fight the Japanese. The Chinese resistance was also relieved and encouraged when Japan needed to separate their troops: one part remaining in China, and the other part departed to protect Japanese territories on the Pacific. All this aid also improved China's standing on the international arena: Chiang Kaishek became a sort of a symbol of Chinese struggle during the war. Seeing all this, one could think that with all this aid, China would be finally able to push back the Japanese aggressor. But it didn't happen. Instead of pushing Japan out of China, the GMD found itself still unable to create any effective form of resistance. Japanese troops were free to continue their conquest of China, burning, killing, raping and looting everything on their path. The Japanese forces went as far as carpet bombing entire Chinese cities. The GMD still fought the same war as from before the US intervention: hit-and-run tactics were still the most common methods to engage with Japan, and the GMD's commanders couldn't think of any better strategy than guerilla warfare. And even if they would find an effective tactic, they would turn it against the CCP, Chiang's most hated enemy. It seemed like nothing would be able to make Chiang Kaishek concentrate on the more immediate threat, the Japanese occupier, rather than a peasant army directed by Mao. Another factor that played against China, similar to the time before US's intervention, was how unpopular the GMD was amongst the Chinese population: the forced recruitment of peasants and other poor people into the GMD's army had such an impact on the population that no-one in China wanted to support Chiang Kaishek. The whole China just lacked the will to fight, and when put under pressure, Chinese forces simply broke down and started to flee. The last nail in the GMD's coffin was simply Chiang Kaishek's awkwardness with his allies: his constant preaching that he's the only chance to win the war in China, frequent requests to change the advisers that disagreed with him and his will to use his allies not against the Japanese, but against the reds proved to be the deciding factor behind US's reluctance to aid China.

In the end, as the war from before the intervention was brutal, bloody and one-sided, the war after US's intervention was brutal, bloody and one-sided as well. The whole conflict remained a demonstration of Japanese superiority over China on every single field. China was forced into a shaky resistance, with everyone fearing for their lives and lacking the will to fight, engaging in a guerilla campaign, where as Japan was free to do whatever they wanted on the Chinese soil: kill, burn, rape, loot, etc. The only thing that saved China from beeing completely subdued to Japanese dominion was the Allied advances towards the Japanese mainland on the Pacific: Japan was loosing their ability to wage a war very quickly, and soon after Pearl Harbor it found itself in a situation with only one predictable result: Japan's defeat by the Americans.