

Weeks after arriving in Germany, Yamashita was presented to Adolf Hitler, the Nazi leader. Each had his own objective for the meeting. Hitler intended to pressure the Japanese military into declaring war on Britain and the United States. Facing the wrath of Russia and the ongoing costs of Japan's war on China, however, Yamashita had no interest. Instead, he hoped to inspect Germany's military techniques and improve Japan's own prospects at war. Despite Hitler's hearty promises of an open exchange of information, the Japanese delegation's questions about radar and other equipment were tossed aside by top Nazi officials. The Japanese were instead treated to a kind of "greatest hits" tour of German military sites around occupied territories.

Privately, Yamashita was underwhelmed by the Führer. "He may be a great orator on a platform," he told staff, "but standing behind his desk listening, he seems much more like a clerk." Nonetheless, he played up the relationship publicly, telling the Berlin correspondent of the Asahi newspaper that Hitler had been profoundly influenced by Japan's military power since boyhood. "Hitler emphasized that in the coming age the interests of Japan and Germany would be identical as the two have common spiritual foundations," he said. "Hitler and Mussolini are united [with Japan] not from any consideration of interest but from a thorough spiritual understanding."

Germany and Japan had a mutual interest in gold.

The understanding may have been spiritual in part—but it was financial, too. In 1938, the Third Reich looted Europe's gold reserves, giving Germany as much as 100 metric tons of hard currency. In the years that followed, the Nazis seized gold from central banks in Poland, Belgium, Holland and the Netherlands, prompting the United Kingdom to ship its gold to Ottawa for safekeeping. Japan, meanwhile, seems to have plundered the rich gold resources of Northeast China, as well as other Asian territories, giving rise to later stories about vast hordes of treasure being hidden by Yamashita in the Philippines.

As the conflict continued and Germany's resources began to run dry, Japan extended a hand: In

1944, the Japanese submarine I-52 was sunk by Allied forces. It was believed to be on a mission to deliver more than two tons of gold, in addition to opium, metal and other raw materials, to the Nazi war machine