

Japan and The Second World War: The Aftermath of Imperialism

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by Joseph A. Mauriello

Introduction

During the era of the weak emperor Taisho (1912-1926), the political power gradually shifted from the oligarchic genro to the parliament and the democratic parties. In World War I, Japan joined the allied powers, but only played a minor role in fighting against German colonial forces in East Asia. After the war, Japan's economical situation worsened. The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the worldwide depression of 1929 intensified the crisis. Territorial expansion became the most promising solution to Japan's problems; after all, the Western nations also owned colonies all over the world. During the 1930's, the military established almost complete control over the government, while, on the other hand, keeping itself independent from it. Indoctrination and censorship in education and media were further intensified. Navy and army officers soon occupied the most important offices, including the office of the Prime Minister. China became the target of Japan's expansion plans. Already earlier, the Japanese had forced China into unequal economical and political treaties; furthermore, many Japanese emigrated to China, especially Manchuria. In 1931, the Japanese army occupied Manchuria, and in the following year, 'Manchukuo' was declared a Japanese protectorate.¹ In the same year, the Japanese air force bombarded Shanghai in order to protect Japanese residents from anti-Japanese movements. In 1933, Japan

withdrew from the League of Nations upon being heavily criticized for its actions in China.² In July 1937, the second sino-Japanese war broke out. A small incident was soon made into a full-scale war by the Japanese army, which acted rather independently, from a more moderate government. The Japanese forces succeeded occupying almost the entire coast of China and committed severe war atrocities on the Chinese population, especially during the fall of the capital Nanking. The Chinese government, however, never surrendered completely, and the war continued on a lower scale until 1945. In concert with the war in China, Japan became involved in World War II. Japanese involvement in World War II was a direct result of Japanese imperialism. It was Japan's involvement in World War II that eventually determined the fate of Japanese imperialism and militarism.

Rise of Imperialism

Imperialism, by definition, is the policy of controlling other nations.³ The rise of imperialism in Japan occurred as turmoil in the rest of the world unfolded. The ineffectiveness of the League of Nations and the rise of fascism and nazism in Europe plagued the world. Imperialism in Japan, however, was not simply a response to external conditions. Its well-springs are to be found within Japanese history.⁴ Japan, after World War I, possessed an

obsession with becoming the world's economic super-power.⁵ Japan's

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obsession with becoming the world's economic super-power is a natural extension of its earlier history. The Meiji Restoration came complete with a slogan, "Let's attack Korea."⁶ Korea was to be conquered, occupied, exploited, and used as a base for an advance into China and beyond until Japan's position as center of the universe was restored.

Evolution of Japanese Imperialism

Imperialism developed in Japan for a plethora of reasons. As a competitor in the colonial world, Japan and its officials arrived at the conclusion that in order to be competitive on the world stage it was imperative to establish an empire. Looking for a model to base Japan's empire upon was not a difficult task. Great Britain, like Japan, was an island nation with relatively few resources available in order to provide for an empire. However with the addition of colonies Great Britain was able to establish a vast colonial empire that the sun always shined upon. Japan desired to build just such an empire based upon the British ideal, yet under the auspices of a Japanese complexion. Japan also wished to include imperial aspects of the other great imperial powers as well. Japan consulted the French as advisers to the Shogun's army. America coached Japan on the intricacies of

depopulating an area in the name of liberty. Of course for the Japanese depopulation was not for the sake of liberty, but for the sake of civilization. Thus

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when it did begin in earnest, modern Japanese imperialism, naturally enough, was a pastiche of styles: the nattiness of the French, the superb arrogance of the British and the blatant hypocrisy of the Americans.⁷

Imperialism in Japan flourished. Japanese officials, for the most part, practiced economic imperialism. Japan wanted to be an economic super-power. In order to accomplish this the Japanese began to industrialize the Japanese landscape. The government itself set up and operated factories in new and unfamiliar industries. The significance of the Japanese state in the industrialization process should not obscure the importance of the private sector. Merchants, samurai, and ex-farmers played a major role from the start in setting up new businesses.⁸ The old samurai contempt for business activities faded as a succession of able entrepreneurs set up new manufacturing and commercial enterprises, and established for themselves the reputation of working for the national interest. It became a natural transition for Japanese merchants, samurai, and ex-farmers. The process of building an imperialist machine came naturally to the Japanese people. They filled new roles with roles from the past that were relatively adaptable.⁹ In order to maintain the industrial

machinery that was developing in Japan imperialism became the chief means of survival. In order to operate the factories and new industries Japan needed raw materials. Japan used its manpower to bring about the aggrandizement of Japan.

Japan Embraces Imperialism

Japan embraced imperialism with open arms. The Japanese viewed imperialism as a way of attaining a place on the world stage. It was the Japanese desire to become an economic super-power that drove the Japanese to imperialism. The western powers were all but willing to assist the Japanese in their conversion to imperialism. Japan took what it deemed to be the most desirable traits of the imperial leaders at the turn of the century and incorporated them into Japan. Japan continued its quest for national wealth and power, through imperialism, well into the twentieth century.

Japan Between the Wars

Japan was increasingly drawn into world affairs by the First World War, during which it fought on the Allied side against Germany.¹⁰ By virtue of contributing to Germany's defeat, it acquired a permanent seat on the Council of the new League of Nations, established by the Treaty of Versailles. Then, over the

period spanning the 1920's and mid 1930's, Japan veered from peaceful expansion. Japan abandoned trade and co-operative diplomacy and turned to armed aggression against China, intensifying confrontation with the West. Japan also got away from a promising, albeit qualified, democratic political evolution by

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succumbing to authoritarian repression and domestic political violence on an unprecedented scale. These radical transformations isolated Japan and hastened the building of a garrison state in the years up to 1937 followed by the outbreak of war with China. Yet fundamentally these shifts demarcated successive and contrasting changes in the international environment and in Japanese politics, along the continuum of Japan's quest, begun in the nineteenth century, for wealth and power.

Japanese Position in World Affairs

After Germany's defeat in 1918, Western recognition of Japan as a great power was partially compromised by the rejection of Japan's proposed racial-equality clause in the League of Nations Covenant. Nevertheless, Japan took part in the construction of a new international order designed to end the old diplomacy of imperialism that had led to the First World War.¹¹ It thus supported the League of Nations and accepted the abrogation of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in agreeing to a new system of multilateral

treaties, signed at the Washington Conference of 1921-22. Japan also accepted a lower level of naval armament than that set for Britain and the United States and agreed to withdraw its forces from Shangtung, as demanded by China.¹²

Japanese Outlook on Global Affairs

The nation was one of the Big Five in the world, had shared the fruits of victory with the Western democracies in World War I, and was imbibing the heady concoction of democracy, with its universal manhood suffrage and politics for the people as well as the aristocrats. The city folk took to Western music, dance, clothing, food, frivolity, and even a few fundamentals.¹³ Significantly, the unfolding of a co-operative foreign policy was accompanied by the development of strong democratic tendencies within Japan which, although traceable to the late Meiji period, had been greatly enhanced by the impact of the First World War.¹⁴ The war quickened the pace of economic and social change which in turn produced a variety of democratic expectations. Allied orders for munitions and other war materials triggered a wartime industrial boom. Rapid expansion of factories and of the urban work force created widening cleavages between the salaried middle class, which had largely benefited from economic growth, and the poor, who were especially vulnerable to inflated wartime prices. The most

notably inflated wartime price was the price of rice, which outstripped wages and farm income.

In consequence, Japan was swept by labor strikes and in 1918 by the nation-wide Rice Riots during which the army was called upon to restore order in some regions.¹⁵ The recession which hit Japan immediately after the war, and subsequent uneven economic growth, created conditions in which many social movements expanded

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further during the 1920's. Communism supplanted anarchism on the radical left and began to compete with moderate socialism for control of the labor movement.

Throughout all this, Japanese society and Japanese perceptions of the outside world grew steadily more complex.¹⁶ Divisions between interest groups within Japanese society deepened. Even within generalized groupings like business and the armed services, particular interests and foci of competition could produce radically different views of the policies that were to be followed. The rise of totalitarian governments in Europe caused segments of the Japanese elite to revise their hierarchy of international prestige and power. Japan's new stature made their actions that much more important than they had ever been before. As Japan's outlook on global issues changed Japan began to break its ties with its former allies. Japanese relations with the United States and Great Britain began to sour. Japan moved closer to the rising totalitarian governments in Europe. As Japan swayed towards

the totalitarian regimes of Europe, militarism began to take shape in Japan.

Rise of Militarism

The world depression, beginning in late 1929, shattered the foundations of Taisho democracy. Japanese trade with the west was severed, thus propelling Japan to create a self-sufficient 'Yen bloc' in East Asia to offset new western trade barriers. It

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destroyed the economic framework of co-operative diplomacy and eventually led to the militarization of the Japanese economy. The center of Japanese militarization, in terms of the economy, was heavy industrial growth. Heavy industrial growth, however, posed a problem for Japan. The depression caused the immediate collapse of many factories, mass urban unemployment, an upsurge of labor strikes and widespread rural destitution. In these chaotic conditions, Japan was ripe for a massive political reaction that paralleled the reaction against Weimar democracy and the rise of the Nazi party.¹⁷

In 1930, as the depression deepened, the Minseito cabinet of the prime minister Hamaguchi overrode the opposition of the navy general staff and committed Japan to the London Naval Treaty whereby Japan again accepted a lower ratio of naval armament as compared to the United States and Great Britain. Conservatives could now blame party government for a weak foreign policy as well

as economic mismanagement. Accused of having encroached on the Emperor's prerogative of supreme command and betraying national security, Hamaguchi was shot and fatally wounded in November 1930.¹⁸ Japan annulled the London Naval Treaty in 1934, thus precipitating a naval arms race with the Anglo-American powers.

Impact of Militarism

In September 1931 the government completely lost control

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of foreign policy when the Guandong Army unilaterally precipitated the Manchurian Incident. This resulted in the Japanese seizure of Manchuria, the formation of the puppet state of Manchukuo in March 1932, and Japan's exodus from the League of Nations in February 1933 following the League's censure of Japanese aggression. The Anglo-American powers and China condemned Japan as a 'bandit nation' and refused to recognize its territorial gains. Japan, however, saw itself as the stabilizing force in East Asia. Although it stood alone, it would take the first step towards a close association with Nazi Germany when it signed the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936.¹⁹

On 15 May 1932 the Seiyukai prime minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi, was murdered because he had opposed the conquest of Manchuria.²⁰ The death of the prime minister brought an end to party cabinets, until 1945. Bureaucratic non-party cabinets increasingly

responsive to army and navy requirements governed Japan. Inukai's assassination was one of many such terrorist incidents against party and zaibatsu leaders in the depression years. The participants were young officers and civilian arch-nationalists who wanted a coup in which a senior officer would take power and carry out a Showa Restoration. To some activists, this nebulous term connoted the elimination of 'corrupt' Western influences and sectarian political conflict associated with Taisho democracy.²¹ Others, inspired by the nationalist socialist thinker, Kita Ikki, emphasized the creation of a powerful military state committed to

the armed liberation of Asia from Western imperialism.

Events Leading up to World War II

Events in Europe did nothing to discourage the Japanese government from holding the view that military strength was the key to diplomatic success. Germany had annexed Austria without provoking any serious response from Britain or France, while in September 1938 the Munich Agreement had allowed Germany to occupy the Sudetenland. Similarly, Japanese actions in China had provoked nothing more serious than criticism at the League of Nations.

Japanese victories and advances in China were now answered by waves of guerilla resistance. In response Konoe sought a new formula which would combine Japanese hegemony with the

suspension of hostilities. In a radio address he proposed a 'New Order in East Asia' based upon an 'equal partnership' between China and Japan.²² A few weeks later the foreign minister, Arita, adopted a harsher version and called for a Japan-China-Manchuria bloc to preserve Eastern civilization from the communist menace and to defend it against the discriminatory tariffs of the west.²³

Events in 1939 added further prestige to German and Italian styles of government. Hitler took Prague and Mussolini occupied Albania. Not surprisingly, Japanese leaders attempted to develop similar techniques of economic and political control.²⁴ In January 1939 the cabinet formulated a Production Expansion Plan. In

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March plans were shaped to conscript all males into military or labor service. A marked emulation of Nazi methods was the new Film Law, which intensified censorship, limited the showing of foreign films, and placed controls on the production and distribution of features, news, and 'cultural' films.

The Second World War: From Japan's Perspective

At the onset of war in Europe Japan was uncertain of the outcome and was apprehensive of involvement in a new conflict. But German successes in the summer of 1940 brought attractive opportunities. France's surrender left Indo-China without significant defenses, Hitler's occupation of the Netherlands left the Dutch East Indies without protection and Britain's struggle for

survival left it unable to reinforce Hong Kong and its southeast Asian colonies.

Events in Europe gave further encouragement to Japanese military and political leaders who wished to transform the political system into a one-party state. A loose national organization, the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, was established and in September 1940 Japan allied itself with Germany and Italy in the Tripartite Pact.²⁵

On 7 December 1941 Japanese carrier-borne aircraft inflicted great damage on the United States (U.S.) Pacific Fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbor. Almost simultaneously amphibious operations

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were launched against the Philippines, Hong Kong, Guam, and Malaya. On 10 December British naval power in the Far East was destroyed when the battleship 'Prince of Wales' and the battlecruiser 'Repulse' were sunk by Japanese aircraft.²⁶ This new conflict was named the 'Great East Asian War', and Japanese propaganda emphasized the theme of colonial liberation and the creation of a new Asian order, led by Japan and freed from Western economic and cultural domination. Within three months Manila, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Rangoon were taken and Dutch power was eliminated.

At home the government sought to use the euphoria of victory to tighten and consolidate its machinery of control. The intensification of government control over its citizens was achieved by the creation of a series of officially controlled organizations. Nowhere was government control more apparent than in

publishing, where measures to control the supply of newsprint and to ensure political conformity culminated in the amalgamation of different sections of the press and the restriction of each prefecture to a single newspaper.²⁷

The Battle of Midway on 6 June 1942 was a crucial turning point in the war for it was Japan's first and most significant military catastrophe. Like the attack on Pearl Harbor, Midway was planned as a surprise operation but the U.S. success in breaking Japanese naval codes enabled its naval commanders to anticipate much of Japan's strategy. Despite this advantage for the Americans, Midway was a costly battle for both sides.

As government fears and insecurity grew, attacks on cultural and political dissidents became more and more frequent. Japan's military response to growing external danger was to define a new 'Vital Defense Zone' embracing Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Indo-China, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the Caroline and Mariana Islands.²⁸ In 1944 Japan suffered a series of calamitous defeats at Imphal and Saipan. The desperate military situation now had a major effect on domestic politics. Members of the Naval General Staff and the Cabinet Planning Staff became convinced that there no longer could be any hope of victory. By February of 1945 some members of Japan's elite began to call for new policies. Proponents for peace began to voice their opinions openly, but to no avail. Most military leaders still saw no alternative to further resistance.

The Second World War: From America's Perspective

The United States was drawn into World War II by virtue of Japan's actions at Pearl Harbor. America promptly declared war on Japan and in the process the Pacific War was born. In the beginning of the Pacific War Japan dominated the American forces. Douglas MacArthur had little success due to poor supplies and a lack of manpower. MacArthur became a domineering figure in the Pacific War. He became the icon of the American effort in the Pacific. With MacArthur's flamboyance and flair, coupled with the memories of Pearl Harbor, Americans needed little motivation to

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fight the Japanese. The turning point for the United States was the Battle of Midway. While it was a costly battle for both sides Japan was defeated and its loss of four naval carriers transformed the balance of power in the Pacific. The Americans defended an overland attack on Port Moresby in New Guinea and eventually permanently diverted the Japanese from Guadalcanal.

American bombers also dealt Japan serious damage. In February 1945 U.S. bombers launched their first incendiary attack on residential areas and its success persuaded General LeMay to launch an unprecedented fire raid on the densely populated areas of northern Tokyo. On 10 March 1945 U.S. incendiaries killed approximately 85,000 people. In April U.S. forces landed on Okinawa

to begin what was to be a long bloody campaign. On 26 July Britain, China and the United States issued the Potsdam Declaration which warned that Japan faced 'prompt and utter destruction' unless it agreed to an unconditional surrender. The military structure in Japan appeared to be unwilling to American officials.²⁹

In early August three devastating blows completed the defeat of Japan. On the 6th a single B-29 bomber destroyed Hiroshima with an atomic bomb. Two days later the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria and the Kurile Islands. On the 9th of August 1945 Nagasaki was devastated in a second nuclear attack. The war with Japan was over.

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Conclusion

Japanese involvement in World War II was a direct result of Japanese imperialism and militarism. Imperialism brought Japan into the global competition for imperial dominance. Competing with traditional imperialist powers such as France and Great Britain, as well as younger imperial powers like Germany and the United States, provided the Japanese with a place in the world. Japan became a player on the world's stage and wished to remain in the limelight. Japan wished to do this by becoming an economic superpower. When this dream failed to become reality militarism became the answer to

Japan's problems. Japan was again able to attain its place in the sun by becoming a great military power. Japan, essentially rejected by the Anglo-American powers, set its sights on larger goals. Japan's defeat in World War II dampened future attempts for Japan's military greatness. Japan's economic greatness, however, would remain a driving force in world politics.

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