

Japan's Quest for Power and World War II in Asia

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The World at War: 1931-1945

Economic Background

While the United States was still struggling to emerge from the Great Depression at the end of the 1930s, and would do so partly because of the war, Japan had emerged from its own period of depression, which had begun in 1926, by the mid-1930s. Many of the young soldiers mobilized into the Japanese army by the early 1930s came from the rural areas, where the effects of the depression were devastating and poverty was widespread. Their commitment to the military effort to expand Japanese territory to achieve economic security can be understood partly in these terms. The depression ended in the mid-1930s in Japan partly because of government deficits used to expand greatly both heavy industry and the military.

Internationally, this was a time when "free trade" was in disrepute. The great powers not only jealously protected their special economic rights within their colonies and spheres of influence, but sought to bolster their sagging economies through high tariffs, dumping of goods, and other trade manipulation. The Japanese, with few natural resources, sought to copy this pattern. They used cutthroat trade practices to sell textiles and other light industrial goods in the East Asian and U.S. markets, severely undercutting British and European manufacturers. They also developed sources of raw materials and heavy industry in the colonies they established in Korea, Taiwan and Manchuria. Japan used high tariffs to limit imports of American and European industrial products.

The Japanese military faced a particular tactical problem in that certain critical raw materials — especially oil and rubber — were not available within the Japanese sphere of influence. Instead, Japan received most of its oil from the United States and rubber from British Malaya, the very two Western nations trying to restrict Japan's expansion. U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's embargo of oil exports to Japan pressured the Japanese navy, which had stocks for only about six months of operations.

The Japanese army, for its part, was originally concerned with fighting the Soviet Union, because of the army's preoccupation with Manchuria and China. The Japanese army governed Manchuria indirectly through the "puppet" state of Manchukuo and developed heavy industry there under its favorite agencies, disliking and distrusting the zaibatsu (large Japanese corporations). But the Soviet army's resistance to Japanese attacks was sufficient to discourage northern expansion.

Meanwhile in 1937, the intensification of Chinese resistance to the pressure of the Japanese military drew Japan into a draining war in the vast reaches of China proper, and in 1940 into operations in French Indochina, far to the south. Thus, when the navy pressed for a "southern" strategy of attacking Dutch Indonesia to get its oil and British Malaya to control its rubber, the army agreed.

While it seems that economic factors were important in Japanese expansion in East Asia, it would be too much to say that colonialism, trade protection, and the American embargo compelled Japan to take this course. Domestic politics, ideology and racism also played a role.

Domestic Politics

The political structure of Japan at this time was inherited from the Meiji era and was increasingly dominated by the military. During the Meiji period, the government was controlled by a small ruling group of elder statesmen who had overthrown the shogun and established the new centralized Japanese state. These men used their position to coordinate the bureaucracy, the military, the parliament, the Imperial Household, and other branches of government. Following their deaths in the early 1920s, no single governmental institution was able to establish full control, until the 1931 Manchurian Incident, when Japan took control of Manchuria. This began a process in which the military behaved autonomously on the Asian mainland and with increasing authority in politics at home.

From 1937 on, Japan was at war with China. By the time General Hideki Tōjō became prime minister and the war against the United States began in 1941, the nation was in a state of "total war" and the military and their supporters were able to force their policies on the government and the people. The wartime regime used existing government controls on public opinion, including schools and textbooks, the media, and the police, but Japan continued to have more of an authoritarian government than a totalitarian one like Hitler's Germany. In particular, the government was never

able to gain real control of the economy and the great zaibatsu, which were more interested in the economic opportunities provided by the military's policies than in submitting loyalty to a patriotic mission.

The emperor has been criticized for not taking a more forceful action to restrain his government, especially in light of his own known preference for peace, but Japanese emperors after the Meiji Restoration had "reigned but not ruled." One wonders if a more forceful emperor in fact could have controlled the army and navy at this late date. The doubts are strengthened in light of the difficulty the emperor had in forcing the military to accept surrender after the atomic bombings. The emperor's decision at that point to bring agreement among his advisers was an extraordinary event in Japanese history.

Ideology

The emperor-based ideology of Japan during World War II was a relatively new creation, dating from the efforts of Meiji oligarchs to unite the nation in response to the Western challenge. Before the Meiji Restoration, the emperor wielded no political power and was viewed simply as a symbol of the Japanese culture. He was the head of the Shintō religion, Japan's native religion, which holds, among other beliefs, that the emperor is descended from gods who created Japan and is therefore semidivine. Westerners of that time knew him only as a shadowy figure somewhat like a pope.

The Meiji oligarchs brought the emperor and Shintō to national prominence, replacing Buddhism as the national religion, for political and ideological reasons — since Buddhism had originated in India and come to Japan via China. The people were not allowed to look at the emperor, or even to speak his name; patriotism had been raised to the unassailable level of sacredness.

It is sometimes difficult to comprehend the extreme sacrifices the Japanese made in the name of the emperor. This can perhaps best be viewed, however, as extreme patriotism — Japanese were taught to give their lives, if necessary, for their emperor. But this was not entirely different from the Americans who gave their lives in the same war for their country and the "American" way. The kamikaze pilots, who were named for the "divine wind" (kami kaze) that destroyed the Mongol fleet in the thirteenth century and saved Japan from invasion, might be compared to the young Iranian soldiers fighting in suicide squadrons in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, or even to fanatical Shiites responsible for the truck bombing of the U.S. Lebanese embassy in 1983.

Racism

The Japanese were proud of their many accomplishments and resented racial slurs they met with in some Western nations. Their attempt to establish a statement of racial equality in the Covenant of the League of Nations was vetoed by the United States (because of opposition in California) and Great Britain (Australian resistance). The Japanese greatly resented this.

The Japanese military was convinced of the willingness of its people to go to any sacrifice for their nation, and it was contemptuous of the "softness" of the U.S. and European democracies, where loyalty and patriotism were tempered by the rights and well-being of the individual. The military's overconfidence in its own abilities and underestimation of the will of these other nations were thus rooted in its own misleading ethnic and racial stereotypes. While Asians, the Japanese saw themselves as less representatives of Asia than Asia's champion. They sought to liberate Asian colonies from the Westerners, whom they disdained. But although the Japanese were initially welcomed in some Asian colonies by the indigenous populations whom they "liberated" from European domination, the arrogance and racial prejudice displayed by the Japanese military governments in these nations created great resentment. This resentment is still evident in some Southeast Asian nations.

The World at War: Discussion Questions

1. What was the economic situation in Japan around 1930? Why was this?
2. Who dominated the government in Japan at this time? What was their ambition?
3. Describe the international economic situation that fueled military conflict among nations. How did Japan fit into this situation?
4. Who was General Hideki Tojo?
5. Explain what an "ideology" is? What ideology was propagated by the Japanese leaders to unite the country behind the war? Explain what role belief in the emperor's special status played in the ideology. What role did racism play — the belief in the special qualities of Japanese and other Asian peoples?
6. Give an example of a situation where the Japanese felt insulted by what they perceived as the racism of Western countries.

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Japan and the United States at War: Pearl Harbor, August 1941

Today Japan and the United States are close allies. But between 1941 and 1945, they fought a bitter and bloody war, which many people remember well today. Why did they fight this war?

The answer on the American side is simple: the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Americans were angry at the Japanese for their invasions of first Manchuria (1931), then China (1937), and later French Indochina (1940). After the Japanese moved into Indochina, President Roosevelt ordered a trade embargo on American scrap steel and oil, on which the Japanese military depended. But the American people felt that Asia was

far away, and a large majority of voters did not want to go to war to stop Japan. The surprise attack on the Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 changed this, outraging the whole U.S. nation and convincing it that it must stop the Japanese army and navy.

Why did Japan attack the United States? This is a more complicated question. Japan knew the United States was economically and military powerful, but it was not afraid of any American attack on its islands. Japan did worry however, that the Americans might help the Chinese resist the Japanese invasion of their country. When President Roosevelt stopped U.S. shipments of steel and oil to Japan, he was doing exactly this: the Japanese are dependent on other countries for raw materials, for they have almost none on their own islands. Without imports of steel and oil, the Japanese military could not fight for long. Without oil, the navy would not be able to move after it had exhausted its six-month reserve. Roosevelt hoped that this economic pressure would force Japan to end its military expansion in East Asia.

The Japanese military saw another solution to the problem: if it could quickly conquer the British and Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia and gain complete control of the oil, rubber, and other raw materials it needed, then it could defend its interests in China and Indochina against those Europeans who were now busy fighting a major war in Europe against the Germans and Italians. The only force that could stop the Japanese was the American Pacific fleet — which was conveniently gathered close to Japan at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii. Knowing that many Americans did not want to fight a war against Japan, the military thought that if it suddenly destroyed the U.S. fleet, America would simply give up and allow Japan to consolidate its grasp on East Asia.

Japan was not militarily or economically powerful enough to fight a long war against the United States, and the Japanese military knew this. Its attack on Pearl Harbor was a tremendous gamble — and though the short-run gamble was successful, the long-run gamble was lost because the Japanese were wrong about the American reaction.

But behind this mistake was another, earlier miscalculation. Ever since Commodore Perry's fleet opened Japan in 1853, in an era of great colonial expansion, the Japanese had watched the European powers dominate East Asia and establish colonies and trading privileges. China, Japan's neighbor, was carved up like a melon as Western powers established their spheres of influence on Chinese territory. After an amazingly short time, Japan was able to develop the economic and military strength to join this competition for dominance of the Asian mainland. Japan defeated China in 1895 and Russia in 1905, in battles over who should dominate Korea. Japan joined the allies against Germany in 1914-18 in a struggle to control a portion of China and then conquered Manchuria in 1931 in an effort to secure a land area rich in raw materials. The Japanese nation and its military, which controlled the government by the 1930s, felt that it then could, and should, control all of East Asia by military force.

Japan's military invasions of other Asian countries, however, brought resistance from not only the European colonial powers, but also the Asian people themselves, and finally, the United States. The Japanese military tried to convince the Japanese people that complete loyalty and obedience would make Japan invincible. Japan's early victories seemed to prove this, but the U.S. victory at Midway Island in June 1942 led to the steady encirclement of the Japanese islands, cutting them off from needed supplies of raw materials. The Japanese navy was destroyed. When this was followed by massive bombardment from the air and the final blow of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japanese invincibility was proven to be a myth. At the end of the war, the Japanese nation was not only starving and devastated by the bombing, but bewildered and shocked by the defeat.

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Pearl Harbor: Discussion Questions

1. Was Japan the first country to try to dominate other countries in Asia? Explain.
2. Why did it seem logical to the Japanese that they, rather than the European powers, should be dominant in Asia?
3. Explain the economic reasons for establishing colonies. What in particular did Japan hope to gain from its colonies?
4. Locate Pearl Harbor on a map.
5. Why did Japan attack the United States at Pearl Harbor?
6. In what ways was the Japanese attack a tactical miscalculation?
7. In what sense could you say that Japan actually defeated itself? Explain.

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