The first few Diets had been managed by the oligarchy primarily because expenses demanded an equally expanding budget. A loophole provided by the constitution was that the imperial government could function on the previous year’s budget, the same as the cabinet continued to function on the previous year’s budget. The road toward true parliamentary government was a rocky one. The political parties that controlled the Lower House of the Diet had struggled with the oligarchy from the very first. It seemed to be an unfair fight because the constitution severely limited the power of opposition parties, leaving only the budget control to its control. But the parties used this power effectively to extort concessions. It became nearly impossible for the oligarchy to function on the previous year’s budget, the same as the cabinet continued to function on the previous year’s budget. The first few Diets had been managed by the oligarchy primarily because expenses demanded an equally expanding budget.

The new constitution had established two institutions to protect and serve the emperor: the Diet and the Privy Council. Just a few men. Who chose the new premier? Who issued imperial edicts? The answer was the same as the cabinet continued to function on the previous year’s budget. The first few Diets had been managed by the oligarchy primarily because expenses demanded an equally expanding budget. A loophole provided by the constitution was that the imperial government could function on the previous year’s budget. The oligarchy had tried early on to siphon off some discontent by bringing members of the parties into the cabinet. Gotō and Mutsu were prime examples of this practice. A major stumbling block on the road to true parliamentary government was the Meiji Constitution. This document was the result of nearly a decade of consideration led primarily by Ito Hirobumi, who had been called the “Father of the Meiji Constitution.” The conservative oligarchy wished to preserve order in a gradual transition toward a wider sharing of power. The oligarchy distrusted the party politicians and feared any form of government that had to take the whims of the landless, uneducated, common people into consideration. The constitution reflected this fear of “the rabble.”

There were five constitutional problems. First and primary was the problem of choosing a premier. A fiction was created that the emperor alone chose his premier; nowhere in the constitution was there a provision for how it actually worked. The reality was that the Sat-Chō genrō collectively determined who the man was to be and then the emperor legitimized that choice.

In the early years it was easy because the genrō merely “shuffled the cards” and alternated in the cabinet posts themselves. When Itō was not premier, perhaps Yamagata would be. Some members did not rise to the pinnacle, but all seven served in one post or another. These Genrō Cabinets usually worked well enough because all the members had the same general ideas in mind. Even the political opposition would grudgingly admit that the genrō were patriots with the future of the country as their primary concern.

The second basic problem was with the genrō concept of “transcendent cabinet.” The idea was that whatever cabinet ruled, the basis for its decisions had to “transcend” politics. Government had to ignore all personal, regional, and political considerations to act for the good of the entire country. There should be no favoritism or prejudice in the minds of the ministers—every decision must “transcend” politics. The cabinet must “float above the clouds” was Yamagata’s favorite metaphor.

Of course this idea was hypocritical. It was used to criticize the actions of politicians and to keep them from forming party cabinets. Every one of the genrō personally benefited from their government service, and every one of them favored friends and allies when it came to granting government contracts. Inoue was sometimes known as the Mitsui Clerk because he served as that zaibatsu’s paymaster to other genrō and as the conduit for political bribes.

All of the genrō accepted gifts and favors from zaibatsu, as did the leaders of the political parties. The difference was that the genrō thought these things to be legitimate perquisites (privileges) of power. They, after all, were transcendent in their decision making. They did not have to curry favor with anyone; they did not have to run for elections. When the politicians accepted gifts and favors, however, these became bribes intended to elicit favoritism.

A third constitutional problem was the succession of the genrō. Because they appeared nowhere in the constitution, there was no machinery for their replacement. Because they had rotated in cabinet offices, a real vacuum arose when they began to retire due to ill health or when they died. By 1910 half of them were dead, and by 1915 only Yamagata was still in full control of his mental faculties. Okuma would have been a possible addition had he not been ousted from the government in 1881 and had he not formed his own party. Mutsu was another, but he died in 1897 as had Gotō. Who would be the new genrō?

A fourth problem was the growing influence of military leaders in domestic politics. All of the genrō were ex-samurai with military experience, but with the exception of Yamagata and Oyama, all considered themselves to be civilians by 1890. The problem arose when the third generation of Meiji leaders came to the fore. These were Sat-Chō protégés, active or retired military men who had served previously within the cabinets as vice-ministers. Before long, they became ministers in their own right, and naturally became candidates for premier as well.

Because the constitution placed the military cabinet ministers under the control of the emperor, technically they were independent of all other ministers including the premier. As long as the premier was a genrō, however, the chance of an Army Minister approaching the emperor directly was unthinkable. But what would happen if such a minister disagreed with a cabinet decision enough to resign his post? The cabinet would have to be reconstituted with another military minister. If enough military men refused to replace him, government could be held ransom until military demands were met. A cabinet could not be formed without one of the military ministers.

The final problem was, Who controlled the emperor? Until 1922 or so it was clear that the genrō did. But Yamagata died in that year, now who spoke for the emperor? Even before that, Japan’s preference for collective consensus made it difficult to continue with just a few men. Who chose the new premier? Who issued imperial edicts? The constitution had established two institutions to protect and serve the emperor: the Imperial Household Ministry and the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal. The first managed the finances of the Imperial House, but also the extensive lands granted to the emperor. The Privy Seal was to guard the actual seal that the emperor used to legitimate laws, edicts,
rescripts, and other documents. But when a charismatic man held either office, he could control access to the emperor, and thus influence politics immensely. The problem was magnified when the Emperor Meiji died in 1912 and was succeeded by his sickly son. Toward the end of the Emperor Taishō’s life his son Hirohito (the Emperor Showa) became a teenage regent.

All five problems that we have just examined boil down to two things: (1) the idea that the emperor actually ruled and thus influenced politics immensely. The problem was magnified when the Emperor Meiji died in 1912 and was succeeded by his sickly son. Toward the end of the Emperor Taishō’s life his son Hirohito (the Emperor Showa) became a teenage regent. (2) There was too much to be “read between the lines” of the Meiji Constitution. The genrō, military ministers, Privy Seal, Privy Council, and Household Minister had too much extraconstitutional power. The early leaders had left too much unwritten; too much assumed; too much without constitutional checks and balances.


DECADES OF PARTY STRUGGLE

By 1898 the parties had gained so much strength in public opinion that they totally controlled the Lower House and brought the budget process to a complete halt. The oligarchy hit on the idea of allowing Okuma and Itagaki to form cabinets—not of their own men but of people chosen by the oligarchy. Okuma and Itagaki were required to resign their membership within their parties before they were allowed to form a cabinet. This did not work very well either, and before very long the government returned to its old system of forming cabinets. It was a cumbersome system that required a great deal of haggling and compromise.

Yamagata never really lost his contempt and distrust of party politicians. He preferred bribes, intimidation, and repression as means to control them. Ito, on the other hand, believed that these men were fundamentally patriots who truly had the best interests of Japan at heart. The difference between them and the genrō was in methods.

Therefore, fairly early on Itō began to court the leaders of the parties and by 1898 had become convinced that they could be trusted to lead the government. He preferred to control them by forming his own party and then inviting them to join. This infuriated Yamagata and the Satsuma side of the genrō. They used the considerable influence of the emperor himself to stop Ito from carrying out his plan for a government party. The use of an imperial edict, however, set a dangerous precedent: Anyone who controlled access to the emperor could use that power for his own purposes.

By 1900 it became apparent that Itō would have his way and form a party. Former Jiyūtō men flocked to him in the formation of the Sennyūkai. Among them were two of Mutu’s political proteges, Hoshi Tōru and Hara Takashi. Hara in particular would inherit both Mutu’s and Ito’s mantles of leadership.

Yamagata thought that he could counter this power by passing legislation that specified that only the top two active duty ranks in the military could serve as the Service Ministers in any cabinet. This would severely limit the pool of candidates. He could control them and thereby heavily influence the formation of any cabinet.

Within a decade the resignation of a Service Minister would bring down two cabinets and prevent a third from being formed. Yamagata also used his power within the Home Ministry to severely repress the rights of the parties to campaign, to publish newspapers, and to hold political rallies. Police were used to break up even peaceful political meetings on the pretext that they represented a threat to “civil tranquility.”

Finally, Yamagata sought to limit the power of politicians to reward their followers with government jobs. All but a very few positions in the bureaucracy were to be filled not through political patronage, but through competition in the Civil Service Examination system. He correctly reasoned that this would create a conservative bureaucracy that would support the government rather than the parties.

By 1900, however, Yamagata had grown tired of the rough-and-tumble of government and wanted to pass on these distasteful tasks to his protégés. Among them was Katsura Tarō, a former general from Chōshū. Katsura was too independent minded to be completely controlled by Yamagata, but he always sought the older man’s advice and showed him the respect that he deserved.

The other “Younger Genrō” (an oxymoron since genrō means “Senior Statesmen”) was Saionji Kinnōchi—who, being from a noble house, was the only genrō not from Satsuma or Chōshū. He and Katsura would alternate as premier for nearly a decade in much the same manner that Ito and Yamagata had taken turns a decade before.

The various political parties functioning by making deals with one of the two men. Without the support of the parties, neither man could have governed. They had to accept party men into their cabinets in return for their support. And so it went until 1918.

In addition to the two main parties, which changed names but remained much the same as the parties originally founded by Itagaki and Ō kuma in the early 1880s, there were a number of smaller parties and political movements. The most influential, though never really powerful, were the various socialist parties. The Christian Socialists led by Katayama Sen preferred to work within the political system. Another, more radical faction led by Kōtoku Shūsui advocated “direct action,” which meant demonstrations and labor strikes. The even more radical groups such as the anarchists and communists were quickly suppressed by the government almost as soon as they could form a new party.

All of the socialists were branded with the disloyal and unpatriotic notoriety of the more radical members. For instance, in 1908 when two flags were raised at a socialist rally reading “Anarchism” and “Anarchic Communism,” it scandalized the country. In 1911, police discovered a plot to assassinate the emperor. Twelve socialists, including the clearly innocent Kōtoku, were executed, and many more were sentenced to life imprisonment in the so-called Great Treason incident.

Police were given a free hand by Yamagata to arrest, harass, intimidate, and even kill leftists. Among them were a number of women who had allied themselves with the socialists. The most famous were Hiratsuka Raichō, Yamakawa Kiku, Yosano Akiko, and Ito Noe. They had been at the forefront of the budding feminist movement and had published a feminist journal called Senō (or “Bluestockings”) after the famous British feminist suffrage movement. Along with a more conservative faction called the Women’s Reform Society, Senō worked to repeal laws that limited the rights of women. They also led the way in a number of social reforms such as the Japan Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the Japan Salvation Army, the Anti-Prostitution League, as well as movements against concubinage and for birth control.

Because none of the major parties really supported the women’s movement, however, many feminists sought support from leftists. But because leftists were suppressed by the government, so too were their feminist allies. Some of the women tried other tactics. Hiratsuka, who formed the New Woman’s Association, lobbied long and hard for “Women’s Issues,” including the repeal of Article Five of the 1890 Police Security Regulations, which forbade political activities by women.

THE PARTIES MATURE

After nearly three decades of almost constant struggle with the genrō, the parties were able to finally form a true party cabinet in 1918. It very nearly was accomplished in 1915, but Yamagata intervened one last time.

In 1912 the Emperor Meiji died after forty-five years of rule. The entire country was severely affected because several generations had never known another emperor. To most Japanese he was Japan. He represented all the positive accomplishments that were in his done. Added to this shock was the suicide of General Nogi Maresuke and his wife in a symbolic ritual to join one’s feudal lord in death. Also, Meiji’s son Yoshihito was both physically and mentally weak. It fell to Meiji’s grandson Hirohito to become a teenage regent for the alling Emperor Taishō.

In the same year that Meiji died, the country was rocked by another crisis caused by Katsura, who attempted to use an imperial rescript to force his political enemies to do his bidding. The dangerous precedent started by Yamagata was used by the Service Ministers to block a new cabinet. Katsura had the emperor issue an edict to force them to continue to serve in the cabinet. The political crisis eventually brought down Katsura’s cabinet and forced a change in Yamagata’s rules. After this, retired officers could not be Service Ministers, thus widening the pool considerably.

When the Sainjō Cabinet was also brought down by the resignation of a Service Minister, Yamagata could find no one to form a new government. Sainjō suggested the head of the Seiyūkai, Hara Takashi, but Yamagata would not allow it. Finally the aged Ōkuma was coaxed out of retirement, and the oligarchy, tottered on for three more years.

These were momentous and dangerous years to say the least. Within months, the Great War (as World War I was called then) broke out in Europe. Japan honored its alliance with Great Britain by attacking and seizing German possessions in China. Then Ōkuma’s plans to act as protector of Allied interests in China led him to issue what have been called the Twenty-One Demands to the Chinese government. As noted earlier, the demands would have required China to give up most of its own sovereignty.

Because Western goods were no longer being sold in China, Japan’s economy quickly began to prosper. But this was a mixed blessing because the increase in Chinese trade drove up the prices of goods in Japan. The resulting inflation caused a series of disturbances in Japan as the poor sank granaries and raided the homes of the rich in search of food. These Rice Riots of 1918 finally brought the Ōkuma Cabinet down, and at last Yamagata had to face reality. The only government that would appease the people was a party cabinet. Hara Takashi formed the first elected cabinet in Japan’s history. It would become the order of the day for the next decade and a half.

For all his claims of being Japan’s first commoner Premier (he refused offers to become a noble), Hara was a traditionalist and basically conservative. He refused all attempts to pass universal manhood suffrage because he still distrusted the common people. He thought it would be too easy for demagogues and charismatic adventurers to rise to power at the head of a rabble. Also, he felt that Japan’s destiny lay in acquiring economic colonies on the Asian mainland.

It was under Hara’s control that Japan attempted to keep the former German possessions in the Chinese Shandong Peninsula as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. Despite Japan’s bribery of corrupt Chinese officials, the Chinese population rose up in an anti-Japanese demonstration that matured into the nationalist May Fourth Movement in 1919. Anti-Japanese boycotts embarrassed Hara’s government. A few years later Japan was coerced into returning Shandong as part of the 1922 Washington Naval Conference (and Five-Power and Nine-Power agreements).

Hara’s preferences for a Japanese economic imperialism in China fueled a rapidly expanding domestic economy. The zaibatsu industrialists benefited by the widening world economy. Unfortunately, the peasantry did not benefit equally. Many farmers became tenants on their own land when they were unable to keep up with the increase in taxes that went along with the industrial prosperity. These landless peasants became the source of continuing restlessness. Tenant strikes and rural violence increased dramatically in the 1920s. The rural discontent would create a very dangerous situation when the world depression hit Japan savagely at the end of the decade.

The bright promise of parliamentary democracy that accompanied Hara’s formation of Japan’s first party cabinet in 1918 was dimmed considerably in 1921 when he was assassinated by a madman. Party cabinets continued sporadically for another ten years, but the rest of decade saw democracy slide dangerously toward military adventurism and finally into a world war.

ON THE “SLIPPERY SLOPE”

The 1920s were turbulent years for Japan. On the whole, the period has been referred to by historians as the era of Taishō Democracy after the posthumous name of Emperor Yoshihito; but the era can also be characterized as the period when Japan moved away from democracy toward military adventurism. It was a “slippery slope” toward what the Japanese call the “Valley of Darkness”: World War II.

The 1920s saw enormous economic growth in Japan. The British, French, and Dutch never really regained the markets that they had lost in China during the war. Japanese manufactured goods dominated the Asian mainland with a vengeance. With the end of the hated Specialized Tariff in 1919, Japan could use tariffs to protect its native industries. Shipping costs from Japan were infinitely cheaper than from Europe.

The other major change in East Asia was the absence of a real Russian threat for nearly a decade. The Communist Revolution in 1917 had forced the Russians to concentrate on the European half of their empire. The Russian resurgence in the 1930s would threaten Japan’s influence in Northeast Asia, but during the 1920s Japan dominated the area.

The ports for the future of Japan were mixed in 1922. Late that year Japan joined the other victors of World War I at the Naval Conference in Washington, D.C. It was here that Japan came as close as it ever would to being in the equal of the major world powers. At that conference Japan joined with America, Britain, and France in the Four-Power Treaty, in which each signatory agreed to respect the Pacific possessions of the others. In addition, Japan signed the Nine-Power Treaty, agreeing to respect the independence and territorial integrity of China, and the Five-Power Treaty, limiting the capital ships of each power’s navy to stipulated tonnage amounts. Japan also agreed to return the Shandong Peninsula to China because this was the greatest impediment to peace. When Japan joined the League of Nations, it appeared that it had at long last become an equal to the rest of the world powers.

Also in 1922, the decade-old women’s rights movement had made some measure of success when its supporters managed to pass the government into amending the 1890 constitution to allow women once again to attend political rallies and sessions of the Diet. Women, however, were still not able to actually join political parties or to vote. Nine years later the Lower House passed a law to allow women to vote, but it was overridden by the Upper House. Women would have to wait another fifteen years before suffrage would be extended to them.

Nevertheless, with the increasing liberalization of the government, women and other political minorities seemed to be making considerable headway. The government was by the mid-1920s spending more of the budget on domestic reform programs than it was on the military. As long as Japan’s economy remained robust, the promises of parliamentary democracy seemed rosy.

The period between 1924 and 1932 held much promise because each successive premiership was appointed by virtue of the fact that he was the president of the dominant political party in the Lower House. Party cabinets were a huge step away from Yamagata’s Transcendental Cabinets. Equally promising, in 1923 a domestic political compromise was reached that gave all adult males the right to vote. The trade-off was a harsh system of Peace Preservation Laws that made it possible to suspend the civil rights of political dissidents.

Even worse than this suppression of political thought was the behavior of the police and right-wing thugs during the devastating Kantō Earthquake of 1923. In addition to the tremendous loss of life (estimates as high as 120,000 killed, perhaps a half-million more were injured or burned, a million more were rendered homeless) from collapsing buildings as well as by the fire caused by the earthquake, the police used the opportunity to arrest and then murder a number of leftists. The rightwing thugs used the disturbance as an excuse to attack thousands of Koreans who had been hired to work as casual laborers. Perhaps more than a thousand were beaten to death amid the rubble of Tokyo. Neither the police nor the thugs were ever called to justice.


BEGINNINGS OF MILITARY ADVENTURISM

Despite the positive beginnings of the Washington Naval Conference, the final few years of the period saw the rise of military adventurism on the Asian continent. The army and navy were very upset that the cabinet had dragged their feet when it came to increasing military budgets. The army saw Russia as the greatest threat and wanted very much to increase the number of active divisions in order to counter Russia in Manchuria and Northeast China. Their argument was that Manchuria had been “paid for in blood” by the one hundred thousand Japanese casualties in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905.

The navy looked southward in its ambitions. It would have preferred to expand Japanese territorial and commercial interests toward Southeast Asia because that is where the oil and rubber needed to run its ships lay. Another difference between the services was that most of the officers in the navy were more cosmopolitan in their views than were the army officers. The navy men had spent considerable time abroad and
were more familiar with foreign nations than the army men.

Both military services tried to put pressure on the civilian government to expand the budgets for them, but the zaibatsu supporters of the parties were more interested in domestic consumer goods than in investing huge amounts of money in the military. The army itself was divided into generational factions. The younger officers were not, for the most part, from old professional samurai families. They were the products of the military academies, heavily influenced by a number of “national socialist” philosophers such as Kita iki who argued that Japan’s growing rural poverty was the fault of the zaibatsu.

Kita and others argued that Japan’s salvation lay in tax reforms and in the expansion of Japan’s agricultural land by annexing Manchuria for Japanese emigration. The young officers believed that the politicians had been corrupted by zaibatsu money and no longer had Japan’s best interests at heart. They also thought that the top ranks of the army were corrupt as well. They wished to rid the country of all of these corrupt officials by revolution. They advocated a true restoration of power to the emperor. They called themselves advocates of the “Imperial Way” (Kōdō Ha) and thought of themselves as inheritors of the late Tokugawa shishi “men of spirit.”

The older generation of officers filled the top ranks of the army. They were mostly from professional military families and had attended the prestigious War College. They, too, were interested in expansion into Manchuria and also thought that the politicians and zaibatsu leaders were corrupt. Where the older officers, who called themselves the “Control Way Faction” (Tōsei-Ha), differed from their Kōdō-Ha subordinates was in the manner of change. They would of course prefer to remain at the top of the army—but also to take over the civilian government as well. They did not advocate revolution; they preferred a more gradual approach. Like their Tōsei-Ha opponents, they believed that Manchuria, dominated and administered by a selfless and patriotic army, could serve as a model for a New Japan—one without corrupt politicians and zaibatsu leaders.

The hotbed for the Young Officer Movement was the army division stationed along the South Manchurian Railroad, known as the Kwantung Army after the name commonly given for the region. Many of the lieutenant generals and captains serving in that division began to hatch plots to force their more cautious superiors into “doing something” in Manchuria.

The first of these plots was to assassinate Japan’s most loyal ally in Northeast Asia, the warlord Zhang Zuolin. The Old Marshal had cooperated with Japan in the joint administration of the area around the railroad. He provided protection for Japanese civilian employers in return for a steady supply of guns and bribes. But in late 1927 Zhang began to realize that China’s new nationalistic government under Chiang Kai-shek offered a better deal for Manchuria. When the young Kwantung Army officers heard of a rumored alliance between Chiang and the Old Marshal, they did not wait for instructions from Tokyo. Their careful plot was hatched in 1928 when they dynamited Zhang’s personal train and then blamed it on Chinese opium dealers and bandits in the area.

Because there was no proof of their involvement, the young Kwantung Army officers demanded that the government of Tanaka Giichi do something to ensure Japan’s primary interest in Manchuria. Although Premier Tanaka was himself an army general, he sympathized more with the Control Way. He was caught in an embarrassing situation. On the one hand, he could not punish the young hotheads because it would embarrass Japan. On the other hand, he wished to bring them under control.

Then, to Tanaka’s great surprise, the young emperor (his father Taishō died in 1926) Hirohito demanded an investigation. Hirohito’s grandfather Meiji had seldom interfered in the government. Hirohito’s father Taishō had been unwieldy both physically and mentally most of his life and had never become involved in government. Tanaka, caught between the emperor and the young officers (who ironically wanted to restore power to Hirohito), could do little but resign.

The greatest tragedy for Japan was that except for a few of the most radical young officers who were quietly retired, the Kwantung Army officers were not brought to justice for the murder of Zhang Zuolin. This led to more plots because the Kōdō-Ha officers felt that they had wide sympathy and support within the army and the government. They became bolder in their actions. The uncontrolling adventurism in Manchuria would worsen, and it would come home to Japan. The nation took its first step on the slippery slope toward militarism when the Kwantung Army was allowed to dictate foreign policy to the government.

The paranoia of the Young Officers was whetted by Japan’s next attempt at diplomacy. The effects of the world depression seemed to threaten every country. The rise of fascism in Spain, Italy, and Germany loomed large as did the resurgence of Russian military power. The major powers hoped to strengthen the bonds among the victors of World War I by convening a new naval conference in London in 1930. Japan, like Britain and America, was once again assured of maintaining one of the largest navies in the world. Each pledged to keep the peace. In thirteen months Japan would break its word, mostly because the Kwantung Army would dictate policy for the government.


The Japanese government at first believed that the Chinese had actually attacked. While it attempted to negotiate with Chiang Kai-shek, it supported the Kwantung Army. It soon became apparent, however, that this was yet another case of military adventurism on the part of the Kōdō-Ha. The government was unable to stop the fighting, however, because the Tōsei-Ha supported the goals of their rivals. They, too, wished to annex Manchuria. Also, the government had no stomach for punishing the army, because the Japanese people wholeheartedly supported their military heroes. Nothing unites domestic rival like a common foreign enemy.

While the Japanese government stalled, Chiang appealed to the League of Nations. The League conducted an investigation led by the British Lord Lytton. After some months, the Commission reported that the Kwantung Army was at fault and recommended that Japan be forced to return to its original positions prior to September 1931. The Young Officers next engineered a Manchurian Revolution in 1932, proclaiming a new independent nation, the Republic of Manchuria (or Manchukuo as it is rendered in Japanese).

“The” Pu-yi, the last emperor of China, was lured into becoming the “emperor” of this new nation, but the Kwantung Army made him into little more than a puppet. The Young Officers dared the Japanese government to undo the independence of Manchuria, soon to become part of Japan’s expanding empire. When the League of Nations criticized these actions, Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke led the Japanese delegation out of the League in protest. Scarcely eighteen months before, Japan was a stalwart of the League. Now it was an international outlaw. Then when Premier Inukai Tsuyoshi criticized these actions, he was promptly assassinated.

For the next decade and a half, virtually anyone who criticized the military was cut down in similar fashion. Not surprisingly, very few men risked their lives against this increasingly popular militarist movement. Even the Tōsei-Ha generals were not safe.

In February 1936 the Young Officers staged a brutal coup at the head of some fourteen troops in downtown Tokyo. They killed several politicians and called for the rest of the army to come to their aid in what they called the Shōwa Restoration. Unfortunately for them, the Shōwa Emperor refused to be restored and branded them as mutineers. The Tōsei-Ha generals learned at this opportune moment to be rid of these rebellious hotheads. The leaders of the coup were rounded up (some preferred to commit suicide than to be taken prisoners) and were quickly tried, condemned, and secretly executed.

But the damage had been done. The radicals had accomplished the aims of their rivals in the military. The generals were now in firm command of the government. Only those civilians who agreed with the military were allowed to serve in the new cabinets. Elections for the Diet continued, but party cabinets were a thing of the distant past. And within a year Japan would be at war with China.

By late 1936 the Chinese Nationalists under Chiang and the Communists under Mao Zedong put aside their decade-long civil war and united against Japanese expansion. In June 1937 an incident at the Marco Polo Bridge outside Beijing escalated rapidly into total war. Again, the Japanese army made initial spectacular inroads, winning nearly every battle. Tragically, this already bloody war would degenerate into horrible Japanese atrocities.


The Mukden Incident

The Kōdō-Ha radicals within the army thought that Japan’s last chance in Manchuria might have been thrown away by the corrupt politicians at the London Naval Conference. They were determined to force the government’s hand. Another plot was hatched in mid-September 1931 at Mukden in northeastern Manchuria. The Kwantung Army hotheads exploded a charge of dynamite near the South Manchurian Railroad and claimed that the Chinese had attacked. The Japanese “reaction” to this alleged attack was as swift as it was carefully planned. Despite being vastly outnumbered by Chinese troops, the Kwantung Army seized almost all of Manchuria in a matter of weeks, and within a month threatened Beijing.
Japan was undeniably the first nation in East Asia to modernize itself effectively, and by the early twentieth century some Japanese chauvinists and militarists envisioned that Japan would emerge as the next conquest dynasty in China and rule over the Chinese as the Mongols and Manchus had done in previous centuries. Japanese militarists regarded themselves and their country as the force that would save the rest of East Asia and the Pacific islands from the twin perils of communism and white man’s imperialism. This would also allow Japan to establish its own empire in the same area, but the Japanese imagined that East Asia would prefer Japanese imperialism to Western imperialism. Eventually Japan originated a charming euphemism for its East Asian empire: the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Japan’s aggression against China began on September 18, 1931, when Japanese forces manufactured a pretext to conquer Manchuria, or China’s northeast. The Japanese claimed that on this day a bomb exploded on a train in Mukden, Manchuria, and that Japanese troops investigating the explosion were fired upon. Japan therefore had no choice but to take over all of Manchuria in self-defense. This action, known as the Manchurian Incident or the Mukden Incident, was the beginning of World War II for China. The next year, Japan transformed Manchuria into an “independent” state and named it Manchukuo, or the “Nation of Manchuria.” Japan then installed a puppet government in Manchukuo that was headed by Henry Pu Yi, the last Qing emperor who was only a child of about three when his dynasty abdicated in early 1912. The rest of the world was not fooled by Japan’s claims that the people of Manchuria had begged Japan to make theirs an independent state, and the League of Nations criticized Japan for its aggression. Japan responded by withdrawing from the League and more or less thumbing its nose at the rest of the world. Japan’s lack of concern for its international image became further apparent in January 1932, when it attacked and occupied the Chinese areas of Shanghai and did not withdraw until the middle of the year, after several foreign powers intervened to help negotiate a truce. But Japanese occupying troops remained in Manchuria, and during the early and mid-1930s the tentacles of Japanese military occupation spread to other areas of northern China. The Japanese knew that Chiang Kai-shek’s government in Nanjing was too busy with the Chinese Communists to resist their invasions effectively.

**Deadlock**

Until the late 1920s, Japanese leaders generally supported the ideal, if not the practice, of economic liberalism. Their attempts to integrate the Japanese economy into a liberal world order, however, became frustrated in the early 1930s when the depressed Western economies placed barriers on Japanese trade to protect their own colonial markets.

Many Japanese believed that the structure of international peace embodied in the League of Nations favoured the Western nations that controlled the world’s resources. Moreover, the West had acted hypocritically by blocking Japanese emigration through anti-Chinese immigration laws in the 1920s.

'... the idea began to emerge in Japan of an East Asian federation or cooperative body ...'

As a result, the idea began to emerge in Japan of an East Asian federation or cooperative body, based on traditional Pan-Asian ideals of universal brotherhood (hakkoku ichiu - eight corners of the world under one roof) and an 'Asia for Asians' liberationist rhetoric.

The Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931 was in this context, and was justified on the basis of the Manchurian-Mongolian seimeisen or 'lifecycle' argument - the idea that Japan's economy was deadlocked. Three factors creating this deadlock loomed large - the shortage of raw materials in Japan, the rapidly expanding Japanese population, and the division of the world into economic blocs.

**Political crises**

Japan's increasing isolation abroad was exacerbated by political crisis at home. The last party prime minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi, was assassinated in May 1932 by right-wing extremists. Political parties survived but were out of power, as 'national unity cabinets' ended the democratic promise of the 1920s.

After an attempted coup d'état on 26 February 1936, 'national unity' was skewed towards greater military power within the state. Then crucially, in May of that year, a rule that only serving officers could become military ministers was reinstated. This gave the military a veto over the cabinet, and the power to topple governments.

'... the climate of assassination, intimidation and propaganda undoubtedly contributed to the breakdown ...'

After the aristocrat Fumimaro Konoe became prime minister for a second time, in 1940, his brain-child, the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, failed to deliver a popular civilian government capable of checking the military. And when General Hideki Tojo came to power in October 1941, he presided over what was effectively a military-bureaucratic regime.

Although, after 1932, there had been a massive upsurge in fundamentalist nationalism, most of Japan's right-wing groups were not as radical as the European fascist movements to which they are often compared. Many embraced moderate political-economic reform, as well as restorationism, which principles had no parallel in fascist ideologies.

None of these groups ever seized power. However, the climate of assassination, intimidation and propaganda undoubtedly contributed to the breakdown of party government and the disappearance of international liberalism from public discourse. The mix of international events and domestic politics was to prove a lethal cocktail.

**Deterrent diplomacy: Germany**

The conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939 was a great shock to pro-German groups in the Japanese government, who regarded the Russians as dangerous. After German forces overran France and the rest of Western Europe in the spring and summer of 1940, the Japanese began to fear that Germany would also seek political control of French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies.

'Deterrent diplomacy: Russia and US'

Relations with the Soviets had a down-turn in November 1936, after Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact (a pact to thwart international communism) with Germany. They reached their lowest ebb when Japanese and Soviet forces clashed in the Nomonhan sector of the Manchurian-Mongolian border in 1939. To defuse the threat of war with Russia, on 13 April 1941, Japan signed a neutrality pact with the Soviets.

'... the emperor himself was becoming concerned about the hawkish tone of the military vis-à-vis negotiations with the United States. But a memorandum issued by US Secretary of State Cordell Hull, on 26 November, demanding that Japan withdraw completely from China and Indochina, played into the hands of Japanese hardliners. On that day the Japanese fleet sailed for Pearl Harbor.'

**Awakening the sleeping giant**

The history of Japanese expansionism highlights its basically ad hoc and opportunistic nature, as well as Japan's desire to create an autonomous region under Japanese leadership.

Japan's annexation of territory throughout SE Asia in 1941-2 was the immediate cause of war in the Pacific during World War Two. However, it was Japan's insistence on retaining its Chinese territory - seen as crucial to its existence by moderates as well as by hardliners - and US insistence that Japan relinquish this territory, that created the real tensions between the two. The tripartite pact (between Japan, Germany and Italy) of September 1940 was also a major stumbling block to good relations between the US and Japan.

'... there was prejudice and misconception, but the Japanese government was also misled by military factions ...'

On the US side, there was prejudice and misconception, but the Japanese government was also misled by military factors, who had learned the wrong lessons from their two short imperial wars with China and Russia. They believed that Allied weakness in south east Asia and American isolationist sentiment would mean another short war.

This, however, was not to be. What the Japanese had done was to awaken the fury of America, and to set in train a war that would end in their total defeat.

By Dr Susan Townsend