

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 Manchuria 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 loyally 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.

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.