THE RISE OF THE MILITARISTS IN JAPAN

While Japan was giving the appearance of being a good neighbor in the western Pacific during the 1920s by involvement in treaties designed to preserve peace, extremist elements in Japan's government, military and civilian population had privately never renounced the use of force to expand Japan's territory. Towards the end of the 1920s a combination of economic, social, and political factors played into the hands of the militarists.

Having been barely touched by World War I, Japanese industry and trade had expanded dramatically during that war to fill the gap left by Europe's devastated industries. However, most of the raw materials needed to supply Japanese manufacturing industry had to be imported because Japan possessed inadequate natural resources. This problem was compounded by substantial population increase. Between 1918 and 1930, Japan's population had expanded dramatically and outstripped the capacity of the nation's resources to support it. To sustain its population blow-out, substantial food imports were essential, but foreign tariffs imposed on its exports of manufactured goods limited the capacity of Japan to pay for its food imports. Japan had tried to deal with its population problem by encouraging emigration of Japanese to countries such as the United States, but had met resistance from Americans who feared the loss of unskilled jobs to cheap immigrant labor.

With China torn by revolution in the 1920s, Japan's militarists viewed China, and in particular, its resource-rich northern region of Manchuria, as an obvious area for Japan to expand its territory by military force and thereby solve its raw material and population problems. However, the Japanese imperial government was not responsive to proposals for military aggression against China at this time.

During the 1920s, Japanese militarists became increasingly distrustful of civilian party government. In 1922, the Washington Naval Conference had allocated to Japan a smaller naval tonnage than that allowed to Great Britain and the United States. This caused resentment in Japan, particularly in the ranks of army and civilian militarists who viewed it as a humiliation for Japan. In 1925, the Kato imperial government cut the army and navy budgets and reduced the Japanese Army by four divisions.

Between 1925 and 1928, Chinese nationalists under the banner of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) had begun to unite all of China's far-flung regions under a Kuomintang Nationalist government. Japan's militarists feared that a unified China under a Nationalist government would block Japanese territorial expansion into Manchuria where Japan had massive commercial interests and had achieved significant political influence. In 1927, Japanese militarists demanded action by the imperial government to block the Chinese Nationalist movement reaching Manchuria. The militarist Prime Minister Tanaka responded by sending Japanese troops to China's Shantung province in 1928 to block a union of Manchuria with the Chinese Nationalist cause.

Military extremists take control of Japan's foreign policy

When Japan acquired Port Arthur on the Kwantung Peninsular of southern Manchuria as one of the fruits of its victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, a Kwantung Army was established to occupy the peninsula, patrol the Japanese-owned South Manchuria Railway zone, and generally protect other Japanese commercial interests in Manchuria. The Kwantung Army included extremist officers who were well aware that senior officers of their army harbored plans to extend Japan's boundaries on the Asian mainland by military force. They were prepared to take direct action in Manchuria to force the Imperial government's hand.

When Manchuria embraced Kuomintang nationalism in 1928, friction quickly developed between Chinese nationalists and Japan's pervasive and heavy-handed bureaucrats in Manchuria. The Manchurians wanted to reduce Japan's political influence in their region of China to a purely commercial presence. They also began to develop Chinese-owned railways to compete with the Japanese-owned and controlled South Manchuria Railway. Japan's militarists viewed these developments as threatening Japan's "special position" in Manchuria and their plans to seize for Japan this huge northern region of China. Extremist officers in Japan's Kwantung Army took steps intended to dampen Nationalist enthusiasm by assassinating the Chinese warlord ruler of Manchuria in 1928, but his successor was an even stronger supporter of Chinese nationalism. The murder of
the Manchurian ruler was not authorized by the imperial government, but when the Tanaka government tried to punish the culprits and re-establish discipline in the army, it was blocked by the Japanese Army General Staff.

The failure to punish the murder of a foreign political leader by officers of the Kwantung Army in Manchuria clearly demonstrated that the imperial government had lost control of extremists in the Japanese Army, and the Tanaka government felt obliged to resign in July 1929. From this time onwards, the course of Japanese foreign policy became increasingly hostage to army extremists, and imperial governments and the Japanese Army General Staff were either unwilling or unable to curb them.

**Intimidation and assassination destabilize Japanese politics**

After 1929, the extreme nationalism encouraged by the Meiji imperial government combined with traditional Japanese militarism to make life increasingly difficult, and often dangerous, for moderates in the imperial government, the Diet (parliament), and the armed services. Army and civilian extremists pointed to Japan's samurai military traditions, and accused moderate bureaucrats, politicians, and armed service leaders of disregard for Japan's national interests if they opposed increased military spending or territorial expansion by force. Extreme nationalists branded democratic government as "un-Japanese", and called for territorial expansion and a return to traditional Japanese ways. The views of extremists would become increasingly influential in Japan during the 1930s, and they would use intimidation and assassination of politicians, businessmen and armed service leaders as means to achieve their aims.

The militarist-dominated Tanaka imperial government was followed by the more moderate Hamaguchi government which tried to curb the power of military extremists. The extremists responded by plotting to overthrow civilian government, and Prime Minister Osachi Hamaguchi was assassinated in 1930. In March 1931, a coup involving senior military leaders was planned but abandoned. Within months, events in Manchuria would draw the focus of Japan's turbulent politics from Tokyo to that vast northern region of China.

**Militarists launch Japan on the path of aggression by seizing Manchuria from China, 1931**

Japan's economy was seriously affected by the Great Depression which began in 1929, and with revenues from Japan's commercial interests in China's Manchurian region thought to be under threat from Chinese nationalism, military and civilian extremists found Japan's imperial government now willing to listen to their demands for a move against Manchuria.

In 1931, militarists dominated the imperial government, and all that they required was a plausible excuse for military action in Manchuria. Rather than wait for such an excuse to occur, the Kwantung Army extremists appear to have decided to create one. On the night of 18 September 1931, a bomb was exploded on the track of the Japanese-owned South Manchuria Railway. The explosion caused very little damage, and no loss of life. The Kwantung Army immediately blamed "Chinese terrorists", and without waiting for approval from the imperial government in Tokyo or producing any proof of its allegation, its troops seized the Manchurian city of Mukden. Proclaiming a need to protect Japanese life and property, and again without approval from Tokyo, the Kwantung Army then undertook the full conquest of Chinese Manchuria. The Kwantung Army simply ignored efforts by the imperial government in Tokyo to bring its military aggression in Manchuria to a halt. When Prime Minister Inukai tried to secure Emperor Hirohito's intervention to bring the Kwantung Army back under government control, he was assassinated by naval officers in May 1932.

When the Kwantung Army had completed its conquest of Manchuria, it converted this vast former region of China into a Japanese puppet state called Manchukuo in September 1932. The last Manchu emperor of China, Henry Pu Yi, agreed to be enthroned as emperor of Japan's puppet state, and he ruled Manchukuo under the control of the Kwantung Army.

**Japan occupies and annexes China's Jehol Province in 1933**

China complained to the League of Nations which called on member states to withhold recognition of Manchukuo. Japan used this mild reprimand as an excuse to withdraw from the League, and freed from the
restraints of the League's Charter, Japanese armies then invaded areas of northern China adjoining the former Chinese Manchuria. Japanese troops occupied China's northern Jehol province and stopped short of the former Chinese capital Peking when a truce was arranged. Under the terms of the truce, Chinese troops were barred from the areas of northern China occupied by Japanese armies. In 1933, Japan formally incorporated China's Jehol province into its puppet state Manchukuo. With two hostile armies facing each other on Chinese territory, the Japanese militarists had set the stage for further conflict with China when a suitable pretext occurred.

Army extremists attempt to overthrow Japan's Imperial Government in 1936

By the mid-1930s, army extremists had become impatient with Japan's existing political and economic structures which they felt were impeding Japan's progress towards military dominance of Asia. They resolved to destroy the power of the politicians and industrialists who were the emperor's chief advisers. On 26 February 1936, fanatical army officers assassinated two of Emperor Hirohito's key advisers, and army mutineers surrounded the Japanese Foreign Office and held much of Tokyo city for three days. Prime Minister Keisuke Okada escaped the assassins' bullets when they killed his brother-in-law by mistake. The plot to overthrow civilian government failed when the Army High Command refused to support the mutineers. The leaders of the mutiny were persuaded to commit suicide to avoid a trial which would have embarrassed the army. The most extreme military leaders were then replaced by ones who were prepared to support civilian government.

Despite the failure of the army mutiny, the imperial government was still dominated by militarists and committed to extension of Japan's borders by military force. In pursuance of this aim, the imperial government formulated the following major foreign policy objectives for Japan: Russian pressure on Japan's empire from the north needed to be resisted; the military conquest of the whole of China should be undertaken; and further territorial expansion to the south should be undertaken to seize for Japan the wealth and raw materials available in the South-East Asian colonies of Britain, France and Holland.

JAPAN'S MILITARY AGGRESSION IN EAST ASIA 1931-1937 (cont.)

Japan aligns itself with Germany and Italy in the Anti-Comintern Pact 1936

In 1936, Japan's imperial government viewed the Soviet Union (formerly Tsarist Russia, and now Russia) as the main threat to Japan's conquests on the mainland of Asia, and in particular, Japan's puppet state of Manchukuo. With further territorial expansion on the Asian mainland in mind, and with China the primary target, Japan began looking for allies who would be comfortable with military aggression and likely to support Japan in the event of a military confrontation with the Soviet Union. Adolf Hitler was pleased to accommodate Japan, and on 25 November 1936, Japan and Germany signed the Anti-Comintern Pact. The ostensible purpose of the Anti-Comintern Pact was to contain the spread of communism, but it contained a secret protocol which required both parties to consult with a view to safeguarding their common interests if either Germany or Japan was attacked by the Soviet Union. The Japanese viewed the pact as a safeguard of Manchukuo against the Soviet Union seeking to use Japan's puppet state as a means of access to an ice-free Pacific port. Fascist Italy joined the pact in 1937.

The Imperial Japanese Navy and Admiral Yamamoto

The Imperial Japanese Navy was more cautious about aggression towards Japan's neighbors in the western Pacific, especially if the aggression might bring about conflict with the powerful United States Navy.

A rising naval officer named Isoroku Yamamoto was one of the leaders of the Japanese Navy's Treaty Faction which supported the 5:5:3 ratio of naval tonnage for Great Britain, the United States and Japan respectively established in 1922 by the Washington Naval Conference. This tonnage ratio was confirmed by the London Naval Treaty in 1930 and extended to 1936.

During tours of duty in the United States, Yamamoto observed American demonstrations of the use of naval aircraft against warships and became convinced that aircraft carriers were more powerful weapons than battleships. Yamamoto would later play a key role in planning the carrier-based air attack on the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, but he had travelled extensively in the United States, and was well aware of its
enormous industrial strength. He believed that Japan could not win a drawn-out war against the United States, and supported the 5:5:3 naval ratio as the best way to avoid armed conflict between Japan and the United States.

**Japan withdraws from the Naval Treaty**

The Japanese Army never accepted the 5:5:3 naval ratio imposed by the Washington Naval Conference, believing that it symbolized Japan's humiliation by Great Britain and the United States. By the middle of the 1930s, the Army's hostility to the naval limitation treaty had been adopted by the majority of Japanese, and having acquired new allies in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, Japan withdrew from the naval limitation treaty in 1937. Japan then began to expand its navy, with particular emphasis on building aircraft carriers and huge battleships, such as the Yamato and Musashi, which were twice the tonnage of the largest British and American battleships.

![Image of battleship](image)

The huge Japanese battleship Yamato at 71,659 tons dwarfed all other warships of its time. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto directed the pivotal Battle of Midway aboard this extraordinary warship in June 1942.

**Japan's undeclared war on China 1937-1945**

In July 1937, tensions between Chinese troops and Japanese troops engaged in military exercises on occupied Chinese territory produced an exchange of firing near Peking (now Beijing). The Japanese used this incident as an excuse to wage all out war against China. Japanese armies invaded China's northern provinces and quickly captured the former Chinese capital Peking. Although poorly trained and equipped, the Chinese army and communist irregulars put up strong resistance to Japan's armies which enjoyed overwhelming superiority in numbers and weapons. The Japanese encountered particularly strong resistance in the north-western Shansi and Shensi provinces where the Chinese communists had established strongholds, and were able to employ guerrilla tactics successfully against the invaders of their country. At the end of 1941, the Japanese had still made no head-way at all in north-western China against the Chinese communist armies which were able to tie down large numbers of Japanese troops.

While fighting was continuing in northern China, the Japanese launched a second front at the city of Shanghai on the eastern coast of China. Despite determined resistance by Chinese nationalist troops, the Japanese captured Shanghai in November, 1937. The Japanese were then able to move up the Yangtze River and lay siege to the Nationalist capital Nanking (now Nanjing).

**The Nanking (Nanjing) Massacre**

The Japanese were infuriated by the strength of Chinese resistance to their invasion, and when China's Nationalist capital Nanking fell in December 1937, Japanese troops summarily executed thousands of Chinese soldiers who had surrendered to them. Japanese troops were then encouraged by their officers to loot the city and slaughter Chinese civilians.

![Image of Nanking Massacre](image)
Independent foreign observers of the Nanking (Nanjing) Massacre, including a German businessman and Nazi Party member named John Rabe, were appalled to see Chinese civilians, both men and women, elderly and children, put to death by Japanese troops with horrifying brutality. As if to make a point, foreigners were invited by Japanese troops to witness mass executions of Chinese prisoners of war on the city quay. Smiling Japanese soldiers appeared to be quite willing to be photographed with raised swords beside their intended victims.

It is not appropriate to describe here the full extent of the atrocities inflicted on Nanking's civilian population, but the impact of war on civilians is important, and historical researchers concerned to pursue this aspect of war may wish to examine the text and photographs at the web-site History Information of China at the entry "The Nanjing Massacre". It is necessary to warn that this web-site contains very disturbing photographs and text.

The atrocities committed by Japanese troops at Nanking were widely publicized by foreign observers, including newspaper correspondents. Despite the fact that young Australian soldiers on the harsh Kokoda Track (or Trail) were always heavily outnumbered by battle-hardened Japanese troops, and often poorly supplied with food and equipment, one can reasonably assume that horrific reports of the Nanking Massacre stiffened their determination to resist the progress of Japanese troops towards Australia.

**China's Nationalist Government moves to Chungking**

China's Nationalist government was forced to abandon China's major coastal cities to the Japanese invaders and withdraw to the city of Chungking in the undeveloped interior of China, where it continued to direct resistance to the Japanese invaders. The Nationalist government was followed by hundreds of thousands of Chinese, of all classes and occupations, on foot, by cart, and by boat, and carrying what possessions they could save from the Japanese. In the wartime capital at Chunking, the Chinese established factories, schools and universities, and prepared for stubborn resistance and a lengthy war. Japan's undeclared, but savage war against China was still in progress when World War II began in Europe with Hitler's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939.

The war in China would provide many Japanese soldiers with combat training for Japan's further military aggression in the South-west Pacific. However, the stubbornness of Chinese resistance and the size of their conquered territory in China placed heavy demands on Japan's army. Of the fifty-one infantry divisions making up the Japanese Army in 1941, thirty-eight of them, comprising about 750,000 men, were stationed in China and Manchuria. The drain on Japanese manpower produced by the continuing war in China would play an important role in Japan's ultimate defeat in the South-West Pacific by reducing Japan's capacity to supply reinforcements for the New Guinea and Solomon Island campaigns when the tide turned against Japan in those areas.

**Japanese Aggression against China sours Relations with the United States**

The Japanese invasion of China, and the brutal treatment of Chinese civilians by Japanese troops, quickly led to a souring of relations between the United States and Japan. The Americans had substantial commercial interests in China which were affected significantly by the drawn-out war. The first major cause of friction occurred in December 1937 when Japanese aircraft attacked an American oil tanker convoy as it was being escorted up the Yangtze River by the American gunboat USS Panay. The Panay was sunk, and the Japanese aircraft then fired on the survivors. Although the Japanese government apologized for the incident and the American lives that were lost, relations between the United States and Japan were correct but never friendly afterwards.