

John L. Tomkinson, *Wars and Warfare*. "The Sino-Japanese War." Athens: Anagnosis Books, 2005. Pp. 85-93.

"The Western Powers taught the Japanese the game of poker, but after acquiring most of the chips they pronounced the game immoral and took up contract bridge. "
(Yosuke Matsuoka, Japanese Foreign Minister)

I. **Background**

- A. In response to intrusion by Europeans, Japan went into complete isolation from the outside world until the mid-nineteenth century. This period of isolation was ended when the US Commodore Perry forced Japan to open up to the outside world.
- B. The **Tokugawa* shoguns*** were forced to concede unequal treaties giving to the Great Powers:
 1. economic advantages,
 2. territorial concessions.
- C. Under the last of the **shoguns** the Japanese began to try to catch up with the West in military organisation and technology.
- D. In 1868 the **Meiji Revolution** (named after the Meiji emperor):
 1. restored belief in the divinity of the Emperors;
 2. brought a group of far-sighted samurai statesmen to power;
 3. revived the ancient local **Shinto*** religion;
 4. created a modern centralized state;
 5. restored the power of the **Samurai** warrior caste;
 6. began the transformation of Japan into a modern industrialised state;
 7. began the development of an army modelled on the Prussian Army and a navy on the British Navy.
- E. In **1894-5 Japan won a war against China**, forced her to give up territory in Korea and Southern Manchuria, but was forced by the powers to hand it back. The Japanese resented this.
- F. In 1889 the outward trappings of modern liberal parliamentary democracy were introduced. Despite the appearance of western democracy, Japan was ruled by an **oligarchy.*** The **genro** coordinated civilian and military affairs. The government did not resign if it lost an election, only if it lost the confidence of the aristocracy, the bureaucrats and the military chiefs.
- G. Powerful industrial companies developed: Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Yasuda. These **zaibatsu*** provided their workers with housing, health care, education. entertainment. etc. in return for their work and loyalty.
- H. In 1898 the USA began to establish itself as a dominant power in the Western Pacific with the annexation of Guam, Hawaii and the Philippines.
- I. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was concluded in 1902. It was a result of Britain's fear of Russian expansion in the Far East. It was regularly revived.

- J. After the **1904-5 Russo-Japanese War**, in which the Japanese defeated the Russians:
1. Manchuria was divided into Japanese and Russian spheres of influence;
 2. The Japanese Army won the right by their victory to direct access to the Emperor, bypassing the ordinary government.
- K. The Japanese had gone on to build up a small empire:
1. by conquering Korea;
 2. by taking over the Soviet position as hegemonic power in Manchuria.
- L. During the First World War Japan:
1. seized Kaichow and all German islands in the Pacific;
 2. presented **Twenty-One Demands** to China to ensure that it would enjoy a leading role in the post-war exploitation of China.
 3. benefitted from the temporary removal of the Allies as competitors, allowing Japan to build up its commercial and industrial power. The Japanese merchant fleet doubled in size.
- M. In 1917, a Japanese expedition was launched to rescue the Czechs who held the Trans-Siberian Railway and to prevent Amur falling into Bolshevik hands. The Japanese remained in Eastern Siberia until 1922, and in North Sakhalin until 1927.
- N. Japan was given a permanent seat on the Council of the League of Nations. But due to Australian opposition, a Japanese bid to include a statement of racial equality in the Covenant of the League was dropped.
- O. The US became concerned that growing Japanese power would rival its own dominance of the Pacific. At the Washington Conferences of 1921-2 it was agreed that:
1. Japan could have a navy three-fifths the size of the US and British navies;
 2. Japan would withdraw from the Kiaochow and Shantung provinces of China;
 3. Japan would keep all former German islands in the North Pacific as League **mandated territories**.*
 4. The Western powers would build no more naval bases in the Western Pacific.
- P. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was allowed to lapse under pressure from the USA, which wished to increase its own influence in the Pacific at the expense of the British.
- Q. In 1922 the Japanese signed the Nine-Power Treaty recognizing the sovereignty of China, and promising not to create special rights in that country. This was the culmination of a long period during which the Americans had sought to limit the penetration of the other imperial powers in China under the cover of an **Open Door Policy**, which gave equal rights to all countries in China. They were hoping in the long run to create a united China under US influence. This left Japan supreme in the Far East with the world's third largest navy, which she could

concentrate in that area, unlike the British and Americans, who had commitments in other areas.

- R. In 1924 the US Congress singled out the Japanese by banning immigration into the USA.
- S. In 1925, universal manhood suffrage* was introduced; although at the same time, the government was given wide powers to suppress Communists and other radicals.
- T. During this period, the army had been democratized. A new generation of army officers drawn from the countryside, poorly educated, highly nationalist, and fiercely loyal to their profession, brought a new extremism and instability to the behaviour of the army.

II. **Japanese Foreign Policy Problems at the End of the 1920s**

- A. In 1928 the US concluded a trade agreement with China. This suggested:
 - 1. A revival of US interest in creating in China a pro-western, Christianized country open to US trade, investment, exploitation and influence.
 - 2. The end of the existing system of foreign privileges in China, to the detriment of the Japanese. Japanese exports to China dropped by one half between 1929 and 1931.
- B. A resurgent nationalism under the **Guomindang (GMD or Kuomintang (KMT))** led by **Jiang Kaishek (Chiang Kai-shek)** also threatened Japanese influence in China. In particular, Manchuria seemed a soft area for expansion, but Jiang Kaishek and the GMD were threatening to establish greater control over the region.
- C. The effect of the great depression and the drop in international trade led to fears that Japan would not be able to afford the foreign exchange to buy the oil, coal, iron, rubber and soya beans which were obtained from China and South-East Asia. The western powers had their colonial empires to protect themselves from the effects of the depression. Japan did not have an overseas empire. 4. At the **London Naval Conference of 1930** the Japanese delegation was persuaded to accept a limit on Japanese cruisers, destroyers and submarines which many at home considered a "sellout" to the west.

III. **Internal Power Struggle**

- A. As the members of the genro died out, effective coordination of civilian and military affairs ceased.
- B. There was a banking crisis during 1927. In the end thirty-six banks collapsed.
- C. The **zaibatsu** took advantage of the the banking crisis to take over many medium sized industrial companies. .
- D. The effects of the depression were severe in Japan, since silk, a major export to the USA, was a luxury product, and people do not buy luxury goods when times are bad.
- E. As a reaction to the economic crisis, hostility, grew to the **zaibatsu**. Ideas of nationalism and state socialism under military rule, known as the Showa

Restoration, began to take hold.

- F. The countryside, which was worst affected by the depression, became a breeding ground for **chauvinistic*** nationalism and militarism.*
- G. During the early 1930s, civil government began to lose the confidence of the people, and power gradually passed from politicians to the military
 - 1. Democracy was not popular with influential groups, such as the army and conservatives.
 - 2. Ordinary people revered the divine emperor, rather than political leaders.
 - 3. The politicians were perceived as corrupt, in the pockets of the zaibatsu.
 - 4. The world economic crisis led to increasing unemployment as other countries raised tariff barriers. Politicians were blamed for the rise in poverty.
 - 5. A series of good harvests brought down the price of rice and impoverished the farmers. (f) Industrial workers and farmers tried to organise, but were suppressed by the police. It seemed that democracy supported the capitalists.
 - 6. The **London Naval Conference of 1930** was felt to have been a "sell-out" of Japan's interests to the western powers. This led to a reaction among the military and the people in favour of nationalists, and against those who favoured a pro-western policy.
 - 7. Many young army officers were attracted by fascism, and wanted to install a strong nationalist government.
 - 8. Writers like **Kita Ikki** argued for "*national socialism*" at home and an aggressive foreign policy abroad.

IV. **The Manchurian Crisis (1931)**

- A. Japan had interests in Manchuria: the South Manchuria Railway and the banking system. It also had troops there to guard them.
 - 1. The Japanese generally believed that as a country lacking in natural resources, their economic survival depended upon their exploitation of Manchuria;
 - 2. It seemed a "soft area" for expansion, but the successes of Jiang Kaishek (Chiang Kaishek) in establishing control over China seemed to suggest that if the Japanese did not act soon, they would lose their chance to expand there.
- B. In 1928 Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka sent a small force into northern China to check the advance of the Guomindang (GMD).
- C. Shortly afterwards, **Chang Tso-lin**, the war lord of Manchuria, was assassinated near Mukden, when his railway carriage was bombed. Japanese officers were generally regarded as the culprits.
 - 1. This was later learned that this was to have been the signal for a Japanese Army plan to seize **Mukden**, but the plan fell through when senior officers would not go along with it. The Chief of the General Staff and other high

- ranking officers were unwilling to take any disciplinary action against the plotters, as this would undermine the prestige of the Army. This set a precedent for indiscipline among the officer corps.
2. It seemed a "soft area" for expansion, but the successes of **Jiang Kaishek (Chiang Kaishek)** in establishing control over China seemed to suggest that if the Japanese did not act soon, they would lose their chance to expand there.
- D. In 1928 Japanese **Prime Minister Tanaka** sent a small force into northern China to check the advance of the **Guomindang (GMD)**.
- E. Shortly afterwards, **Chang Tso-lin**, the war lord of Manchuria, was assassinated near Mukden, when his railway carriage was bombed. Japanese officers were generally regarded as the culprits.
1. This was later learned that this was to have been the signal for a Japanese Army plan to seize Mukden, but the plan fell through when senior officers would not go along with it. The Chief of the General Staff and other high ranking officers were unwilling to take any disciplinary action against the plotters, as this would undermine the prestige of the Army. This set a precedent for indiscipline among the officer corps.
- F. By 1930, the Army was distressed at
1. The suffering of the peasants of northern Japan, an area from which recruitment was traditional;
 2. The government forcing the chiefs of the Navy to accept the results of the London Naval Disarmament Conference; The Army felt that it might also be forced to accept unpalatable agreements in the future.
 3. Subservience to the West in general;
 4. The government's "soft" policy towards China.
- G. This led to considerable violence:
1. A new conspiracy of Army officers was formed to plan a coup and impose a military government on Japan, which included some high ranking officers. In March, it came to the notice of General Ugaki, who ordered it ended, in what was known as the March Incident.
- H. For several months before September 1931 there had been tension between the Japanese Army and the new warlord of Manchuria, who had begun to build new railway lines competing directly
- I. Manchuria was sparsely populated, compared with Japan. and it was thought that it might solve Japan's overpopulation problem.
- J. In September 1931, middle-ranking army officers blew up a section of the South Manchurian Railway, blamed it upon the Chinese, and then proceeded to seize Manchuria without Japanese government permission.
- K. This action led to an outburst of nationalist sentiment among the population. The Emperor deplored it, but did not order it to cease.
- L. In the face of international protests, the Japanese government agreed to withdraw,

but the Army continued its advance. The discrepancy between the professions of the Japanese government in Tokyo and the behaviour of the Japanese Army in Manchuria led most foreign observers to believe that Japanese government was being deliberately deceitful. In fact the Japanese government did not know, and could not control, what the Japanese Army was doing.

- M. The League of Nations called upon the Japanese to withdraw. The government agreed to do so, but the army ignored them and continued the occupation of Manchuria.
- N. In March 1932 a Manchurian Independence Movement, financed by the Japanese army established the puppet state of Manchukuo, supposedly under **Henry Pu Yi**, the deposed Chinese emperor, but effectively it was ruled by the Japanese army.
- O. The Japanese extended complete control over Manchuria by the **Tangku Truce (1933)**. They:
 - 1. Suppressed opponents, especially Marxists;
 - 2. Rigidly controlled education;
 - 3. Built up armaments;
 - 4. Used the area as a base for further attacks upon China.
- P. The response of the Great Powers was one of appeasement:
 - 1. President Hoover was following an isolationist policy and wanted no involvement in the Far East. The **Stimson Doctrine** of Non-Recognition was adopted., whereby the USA "refused to recognise" the *fait accompli*.
 - 2. Sir John Simon, British Foreign Secretary, actually defended Japanese actions.
 - 3. The League of Nations sent **Lord Lytton** to report on the situation. He travelled to the area very slowly, and then issued a report condemning Japan, but saying that there was fault on both sides. In response, Japan withdrew, from the League altogether.
 - 4. This was:
 - a. the first failure of **collective security**.*
 - b. the first example of **appeasement**.*
 - c. It is sometimes said that this act of aggression was the real beginning of the Second World War.
 - 5. **Manchukuo** was administered by the army on "national socialist" lines and not exploited by the zaibatsu. Control over this area gave the army an independent base outside the country, and strengthened their position against the zaibatsu. Effectively, the Japanese armed forces were beyond the control of the civilian government.
- V. **The Establishment of a Single-Party State**
 - A. The effect of the acquisition of an area larger than Japan, containing 30 million people and valuable agricultural and mineral resources made the army and the nationalists very popular within Japan itself.
 - B. At the same time as the Manchurian invasion took place, another coup plot was

- discovered in Tokyo. This one planned the bombing of the cabinet and the establishment of a military junta. Once again, in this October Incident, only nominal penalties were imposed on the guilty.
- C. In 1932, fighting broke out between the Chinese and a Japanese Naval Party at Shanghai
1. Extensive bombing of the city by Japanese naval aeroplanes and a rescue mission by the army was necessary to recover them. The Japanese were forced to leave by the British.
- D. In 1932 the **League of Blood** a group of peasants led by a Buddhist priest, pledged to assassinate the ruling clique who were held to be responsible for the misery of the farmers. Before being identified and eliminated, they had killed several high officials, including the Finance Minister.
- E. After their elimination, bands of army and naval cadets continued their work. In May 1932 they struck at the government, the *zaibatsu* and the political parties, killing the Prime Minister Inukai, and others. The assassins received much public sympathy and short prison sentences.
- F. Afterwards, the army refused to supply a Minister of War to a Prime Minister who was the leader of a political party.
- G. At this time, the Army itself was rent by internal factions, both nationalist:
1. **Kodo-ha (Imperial Way School)**: contained younger officers and was the more radical, obsessed by the need for war with the USSR.
 2. **Tosei-ha (Control School)**: preoccupied with the need to take control of China.
- H. Police repression and the establishment of a semi-military dictatorship followed. The power of the political parties in the Diet* decreased during this period, and real authority passed to a small group of cabinet ministers under the leadership of the armed forces.
- I. Teachers were forced to give greater attention to:
1. the Shinto religion;
 2. military training;
 3. nationalist ideas.
- J. Internal repression increased with:
1. the arrest of left wing political leaders and workers' leaders;
 2. the censorship of newspapers;
 3. attacks upon western values.
- K. In 1933 the Japanese advanced piecemeal into NE. China taking advantage of the ongoing Chinese Civil War.
- L. In summer 1934 a civilian plot to bomb the entire cabinet was foiled.
- M. From the end of 1934 the **Imperial Way School** began to lose ground to the **Control School**. This led to killings and an attempted coup by supporters of a Showa Restoration. They seized part of central Tokyo. It collapsed only when the emperor ordered their surrender. On this occasion there were executions,

- including the patron of the "**Showa Restoration**,"* **Kita Ikki**. Following this coup attempt radicals were arrested.
- N. Between 1934 and 1936 the Japanese threw off the restrictions of the Washington Conference and began a naval building programme.
- O. The army assumed greater and greater control of the national life.
1. By late 1936 the Minister of Finance referred to a "quasi-wartime economy."
 2. When Japan signed the **Anti-Comintern Pact** in December 1936, the negotiations were conducted by the army, and not the Foreign Ministry. This treaty was directed against the Soviet Union.
- P. In January 1937 there were protests in the Diet about the army's usurpation of power, and Prince Konoye became Prime Minister
- Q. Following Hitler's successes
1. Political parties were dissolved (they were already virtual impotent) and replaced by the **Imperial Rule Assistance Association** (modeled upon European fascist parties);
 2. All trade unions were dissolved and were replaced by "associations for service to industry."
- R. Although like European fascism in many ways, it was different in that:
1. there was no sudden seizure of power;
 2. there was no outright break with constitutional democracy;
 3. there was **no charismatic*** leader. The emperor filled this role.
- S. The zaibatsu elite who had supported the Westernisers now changed sides and supported the reformers in the armed forces. These began a programme of rearmament in preparation for overseas conquest.
- VI. **The Background to the Sino-Japanese War**
- A. Following the establishment of Manchukuo, the Japanese followed a policy of supporting the assertion of independence by local governments in the north of China. This had the effect of:
1. weakening the Nationalists and the unity of the country;
 2. extending Japanese influence over Northern China.
- B. In May 1934 the Japanese proposed to the USA that the US should be regarded as the "stabilizing power" in the Eastern Pacific, and Japan in the West. The US rejected this division of the Pacific into two spheres of influence. US Secretary of State Cordell Hull asserted that the USA "had a special interest in preserving peace and order in China;"; that is, the USA regarded itself as the hegemonic power across the entire Pacific and its coastal states in the Far East.
- C. In August 1934 the Japanese Navy began to push for the abrogation of the existing naval agreements. At the **London Naval Conference**, the Japanese requested recognition of its right to build a navy as large as that of the USA. The USA refused to accept this, and in December the Japanese unilaterally renounced the existing arrangements, which were based on the **Washington Conference** of

- 1922.
- D. Threatened by the Civil War with the Communists, in 1935 Jiang Kai-shek (Chiang Kai-shek) offered the Japanese a compromise:
 - 1. The Nationalists would recognise **Manchukuo**;
 - 2. The Japanese would respect and support Guomindang (Kuomintang) rule in China.
 - 3. The Japanese military decided instead to continue the policy of detaching the northern provinces from China under the cover of independence.
 - E. In 1936 the Japanese Navy began to plan to enforce its hegemony over the Western Pacific Ocean in opposition to the USA:
 - 1. As the Japanese oil supply was dependent upon the US, it was clear that this would involve manoeuvring into a good position for the exploitation of the resources of the southern seas, particularly oil. Private Japanese businesses began to penetrate S. E. Asia.
 - 2. A naval building programme was begun.
 - F. By 1936, a large part of Inner Mongolia and Northern China as far south as Beijing was effectively under Japanese control, taking advantage of the Chinese Civil War.
 - G. In December of that year, Jiang Kaishek was kidnaped by the Manchurian Warlord at Xian (Sian) in an attempt to divert his attention from harassing the Chinese Communists to focusing upon resisting the Japanese.
 - H. Fighting broke out between Chinese and Japanese troops at the Marco Polo Bridge near Beijing on 7th July, 1937, when, the Japanese claimed, Chinese soldiers fired upon a Japanese night patrol. The Japanese Minister of War, General Sugiyama, promptly sent reinforcements from Manchukuo and Korea. The prime minister, Prince Konoye (Konoe) Fumimaro, first tried to resist this escalation of the fighting, then gave way. Thus outright war broke out.
 - I. China appealed to the League of Nations, which condemned Japanese aggression. But the Japanese were not members of the League, and they would not attend an international conference called to address the situation.
 - J. The Europeans were preoccupied with Hitler and the Spanish Civil War at the time, while the US was intent upon maintaining its policy of isolation.
- VII. **The Causes of the Sino-Japanese War**
- A. Japan had a high population on land, much of which is unfit for agriculture, and poorly provided with natural resources. It needed:
 - 1. food and raw materials for industry;
 - 2. markets for manufactured goods. Control of China would go some way to meeting this.
 - B. This desire for territory was fed by the desire to achieve autarchy to escape the effects of the international depression and future trade fluctuations.
 - C. There was a "soft area" for expansion in China:
 - 1. If Jiang Kaishek was successful in establishing a strong central

- government, the chance to expand there would be lost;
2. More likely, in the opinion of the Japanese, rule by the incompetent and corrupt Jiang Kaishek would lead inevitably to the success of the Communists and the spread of Bolshevism throughout the region, and an increase in the power of the USSR in the area. Both possibilities provoked precipitate action.
- D. The Japanese resented Europeans' assumption of racial superiority. This led them to desire to achieve equality with the Great Powers by winning local hegemonic status and an empire.
- E. The army wished to try out their western-style forces, win victories, and so obtain prestige and greater power within the state, and during the 1930s, the government came to be dominated by the armed forces.
- F. The Americans and the League of Nations had failed adequately to respond to the Manchurian adventure. This appeasement suggested that there would be nothing to stop further Japanese actions against China.

VIII. The Course of the War

- A. In August fighting began in Shanghai.
- B. Japanese naval officers bombed and sank the USS *Panay* in the River Yangtze, and an artillery unit shelled the British gunboat *HMS Ladybird*. The US and UK decided to maintain their policy of non-intervention.
- C. In December the Japanese captured Nanjing (Nanking). Atrocities were committed with the wholesale massacre of the population in what became known as the "rape of Nanking."
- D. In Summer 1938 Japanese and Soviet troops fought at the borders of Korea, Manchukuo and the USSR. For the first time, the emperor exercised some restraint on the army.
- E. In the autumn the Japanese captured Hankow and Canton.
- F. The nationalists under Jiang Kaishek and the Communists under Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) decided to end their civil war and combine against the Japanese.
- G. A new capital was established by the Nationalists inland at Chongqing (Chongging).
- H. Japanese control of China outside the cities was limited to the coastal regions except in the northeast, and was always shallow outside the towns.
- I. Serious fighting broke out between Soviet and Japanese forces at Nomonhan between May and September on the borders of Manchukuo and Outer Mongolia.
- J. Early in 1941, Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke concluded a Neutrality Pact with Stalin, effectively securing this border.
- K. This Sino-Japanese War was the beginning of the fighting which escalated into the Second World War.

IX. The Consequences of the Sino-Japanese War

- A. The Sino-Japanese War "soaked up" Japanese resources which both:
1. made war with the USA and Britain more likely, in order to obtain the

- resources required to win the war;
2. made the defeat of Japan more likely, since its resources were hopelessly overstretched in fighting both China and the Western Allies.
- B. It made the victory of the Communists in the Chinese Civil War more likely, since it revealed the incompetence and lack of patriotism of the Guomindang leadership to the Chinese people.
- C. The death and destruction set back the development of China, making the task of reconstruction in 1949 that much more difficult.

Glossary

appeasement: offering conciliation in the face of aggression

charismatic: able to attract and command support by the power of personality

chauvinistic: aggressive, bellicose

collective security: the arrangements made by the Great Powers to provide for their own security and for the avoidance of a general war between them, replacing the former alliance system and the balance of power

Diet: the Japanese parliament, made up of a House of Nobles and a House of Representatives

genro: oligarchic council which ruled Japan at the turn of the century

Guomindang (Kuomintang) - GMD (KMT): party founded by Sun Yat-sen to modernize China

mandated territories: territories officially taken over by the League of Nations, administered on behalf of the League by one of the Great Powers

Meiji Revolution: late nineteenth century economic and social revolution launched from above, designed to modernize Japan

militaristic. glorifying the military and the values of the military

oligarchy: rule by a small elite

Samurai: the members of the traditional warrior aristocracy

Shinto: the traditional Japanese nature religion

shogun: feudal military leader

Showa Restoration: a projected "cleansing" of the nation of western corruption, named after the Showa emperor, Hirohito

Tokugawa system: Japanese feudal system

Zalbatsu: financial conglomerates

Bibliography

Allen, L., *Japan: the Years of Triumph*, MacDonald (London, 1971)

Beasley, W. E. *Japanese Imperialism, 1894-1945*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1987)

Boyle, John Hunter, *China and Japan at War, 1937-1945: the Politics of Collaboration*, Stanford University Press, (Stanford, CA., 1972)

China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937-1945, eds. James Chieh Hsiung & Steven I. Levine, Armonk, (New York, 1992)

Coble, Parks M., *Facing Japan: Chinese Politics and Japanese Imperialism, 1931-1937*, Council on East Asian Studies Harvard University, (Cambridge, Mass., 1991)

Fewster, S., *Japan*, Longman (London, 1988)

Hung, Chang-tai, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945*, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA., 1994)

Lamb, Margaret & Tarling, Nicholas, *From Versailles to Pearl Harbour: The Origins of the Second World War in Europe and Asia*, Palgrave (London, 2001)

Livingston, J., Moore, J. & Oldfather, F., *The Japan Reader: Imperial Japan, 1800-1945*, Penguin (London, 1976)

Storry, Richard, *A Modern History of Japan, rev ed.*, Penguin (London, 1960) Williams, B., *Modern Japan*, Longman (London, 1987)

