

Japan



like China, Japan, an independent country, had fought on the side of the Allies in World War I. During the conflict, the Japanese supplied weapons to their European partners, particularly to Russia. At the same time, they took advantage of the war to expand their economic and political influence in East Asia. In addition to ruling Korea and Taiwan, Japan pressed for an enlargement of its role in China. In 1915 Japanese diplomats forced the Chinese government to accept a list of terms known as the Twenty-One Demands. The Twenty-One Demands, in effect, made China a Japanese protectorate.

Japan and the West

When World War I ended, Japan received Germany's Pacific islands north of the Equator as mandates from the League of Nations. The Japanese also entered into a series of military and commercial agreements with the Western powers. A disarmament conference held in Washington, D.C., in 1922 led to a five-power agreement among Japan, Great Britain, the United States, Italy, and France that allowed Japan to become the world's largest naval power after Great Britain and the United States. Yet, in spite of this and other gains, the Japanese were bitter toward the West. First, Japan felt that the West did not accept it as an equal. In 1919 the League of Nations, dominated by Western powers, refused to accept Japan's demand for a statement on racial equality in the League's charter. The Japanese regarded this rejection as a humiliation. In 1924 the United States banned further Japanese immigration to its shores. In response, the Japanese staged demonstrations and boycotted American goods.

The Japanese were angered further by the West's refusal to support Japanese policy in China. Japan wanted to retain the Open Door policy. As a result of Western pressure, Japan had to abandon the Twenty-One Demands and recognize Western interests in China.

After World War I, Japan faced social and economic challenges at home. Of major concern was a population explosion, or dramatic increase in population. Japan's population had increased from nearly 35 million in 1872 to about 60 million in 1925. This rate of increase was a challenge because of the already high density of population on the Japanese islands.

Japan's Industrial Growth

Since emigration was cut off to such places as the United States, the Japanese looked for other ways to cope. They placed new emphasis on manufacturing and foreign trade. It was hoped that new factories and markets would provide employment for large numbers of people. Government-controlled banks provided the needed capital to encourage the expansion of heavy industry, or the manufacture of machinery and equipment needed for factories and mines. Industries important to national defense, especially steel and the railroads, were owned by the government, but most of the Japanese economy was in the hands of large privately owned businesses known together as the *zaibatsu* (zy•BAHT•soo).

Social and Political Changes

Meanwhile, Japan's working class increased in importance. Because of overpopulation in the countryside, land already scarce was continually subdivided among farmers. Rural economic woes enabled farm villages to provide the bulk of labor for the new urban industries. Along with male workers, many young women from rural areas found jobs in the factories. Labor unions became more powerful and increased their membership to more than 300,000 members by the end of the 1920s. The growth of the urban, working-class population produced movements demanding social changes. Several efforts by intellectuals to organize Socialist groups, however, were speedily met with police repression. During this period, the urban middle class expanded as well. Japanese cities became great metropolitan areas and centers of middle-class culture. The Tokyo-Yokohama area, devastated by a terrible earthquake in 1923, took on a new appearance as Western influences increasingly shaped the tempo of urban life. American music, dancing, and sports especially became popular, and rising standards of living and expectations produced the need for more and better higher education. With the growth of the working and middle classes, steps were taken toward greater political democracy. In 1925 the Japanese parliament granted universal male suffrage; voters increased from 14 million to 14 million. Japanese women, however, did not receive the right to vote until 1947.

Political Weaknesses

In spite of these gains, democracy remained very limited in Japan. Political power was actually in the hands of nobles and urban industrialists. The emperor, Hirohito, was a constitutional monarch.

However, he was a powerful symbol of traditional authority. Behind the emperor was an influential group of military leaders, who were opposed to democratic reforms.

The appeal of antidemocratic nationalist groups increased as the economy deteriorated in

Without seeking approval from the government, army leaders decided to invade the northeastern region of China known as Manchuria. In short order, they launched an invasion. It was clear that the Japanese government could no longer control its own army. In five months the powerful Japanese army had conquered Manchuria.

The conquest of Manchuria was a clear sign of the plans of the military to dominate the Japanese government at home and expand Japanese influence abroad. The principal opposition to democratic government came from young military officers. Largely from rural backgrounds, they opposed the urban luxuries of the politicians and readily accepted extremist ideas.

By the early 1930s extremist groups in the military were ready to use violence to bend the government to their will. In 1932 army officers assassinated a prime minister who dared to oppose their views. Then, in 1936, another group of officers led an armed revolt against the government. Although the revolt collapsed, it did not halt the steady takeover of government policy making by the military. By early 1937 the army and the government had become one and the same.

Many democratically-minded Japanese hoped that Emperor Hirohito would try to thwart the spread of militarism. As a crown prince, the emperor had traveled in the West and had a keen appreciation of Western ways. Palace advisers, however, feared that any strong stand by the emperor would only increase the extremism of the military leaders. Above all, they feared that the emperor would be removed from office and that the Japanese monarchy would be abolished.

As international criticism of Japan's expansion grew, many Japanese rallied to the support of their soldiers and the military leaders. With no powerful political opposition at home, Japan's military leaders looked forward to conquering all of Asia. Their dreams of a mighty Japanese empire—like the dreams of German and Italian rulers—brought the world to war.

In September 1931 the Japanese military demonstrated just how powerful it had become.

Military Expansion

During the 1930s, militarism began to influence all aspects of Japanese life—from foreign policy to education. Supporters of the military program opposed the spread of Western lifestyles in Japan and favored traditional Japanese ways. Military dress, including items such as the samurai swords, even carried out military drills in schools and participated in parades.

Militarism and Daily Life

—Hashimoto Kingoro, *Addresses to Young Men*

“We are like a great crowd of people packed into a small and narrow room, and there are only three doors through which we might escape, namely emigration, advance into world markets, and expansion of territory. The first door ... has been barred to us by the anti-Japanese immigration policies of other countries. The second door ... is being pushed shut by tariff barriers. Japan should rush upon the last door [expansion of territory].”

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he 1930s. A worldwide fall in prices caused by the Great Depression devastated Japan's silk factories and other industries. Millions of workers lost their jobs and could not find new ones. Some began to starve, and children went begging in the streets. In November 1930 an assassin from a secret society shot Prime Minister Osachi Hamaguchi (oh•SAH•chee hah•mah•GOO•chee). Teetering on the brink of economic chaos, many impoverished farmers and workers in Japan looked to strong-minded military leaders such as Hashimoto Kingoro (hah•shee•MOH•toh keen•GOH•roh) for answers.