

Japanese Aggressive Foreign Policy (1931–41)

Japan emerged from the First World War in a very strong economic position indeed. Between 1914–1918, she had:

1. Trebled (almost) her exports of cotton cloth
2. Doubled the tonnage of her merchant fleet

During the Great War, the Japanese had supplied their allies with shipping and manufactured goods and had stepped in to supply orders in Asia which the Europeans could not fulfill.

Japan had a strong modern navy (and had actually beaten the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5). Everything in the Japanese garden looked 'rosy' in 1918; but not for long.

In 1925, all adult males in Japan were given the vote. Japan appeared to be following the west in terms of becoming a 'democracy'. But in the early 1930s the Japanese army assumed control of the government. What went wrong?

The Road to Military Dictatorship

1. Democracy was not popular with all groups in Japan. Right-wing conservatives in the Japanese upper house of parliament and in the Privy Council to the Emperor, as well as many army officers, wanted a dictatorship. Such men did all they could to discredit whichever government was in power. The army wanted to take action in China which was torn by civil war in the Warlord Era (1916–28).
2. Many Japanese politicians were corrupt. They regularly accepted bribes from Big Business. The regular outbreaks of violence in the Japanese parliament, as accusations of bribery and corruption were levelled, did little to inspire confidence in the democratic parliamentary system.²
3. The great trading 'boom' of the First World War years only lasted until 1921. By this time European industry began to revive and reclaimed its lost markets. Unemployment and industrial unrest followed. At the same time, a series of 'bumper' harvests drastically reduced the price of rice and agricultural profits. When farmers and workers attempted to form themselves into a political party they were ruthlessly suppressed. This led to workers, as well as conservatives and army officers, becoming disaffected to a parliament which called itself democratic but was so obviously taking bribes from big business and did not appear to support the working people.
4. The World Economic Depression following the Wall Street Crash in 1929 affected Japan severely. Japanese exports shrank disastrously as other nations either introduced or raised tariffs to protect their own industries. One of the worst affected Japanese exports was that of raw silk to the United States. American consumers could no longer afford luxury items during the Depression. Consequently, the price of raw silk in 1932 stood at only ¹/₁₀ of the 1923 figure. This was a further blow to farmers (half of whom produced silk as well as rice). Desperate poverty followed and peasants and workers blamed the Government and Big Business.

The Invasion of Manchuria

On 18th September 1931, the Japanese occupied Manchuria, a province of China.

The situation had been brought to a head by Chinese attempts to squeeze Japanese trade and business out of Manchuria.

The Japanese had invested millions of pounds in Manchuria. They owned mining interests, Soya bean plantations, the banking system, railway networks, factories and so forth. A loss of investment of this magnitude would have proved a severe blow to the Japanese economy already hard hit by World economic depression.

In an attempt to protect their economic interests, the Japanese army (without permission from the Government) invaded and occupied Manchuria.

The army took action following the explosion of a bomb on the Japanese-owned railway line outside Mukden.

Although the Japanese army deliberately caused the explosion themselves, they blamed the Chinese. This gave the

army the excuse to invade without waiting for permission from Emperor Hirohito's government.

When Foreign Minister Shidehara heard the news, he is said to have turned ashen grey.

At the League of Nations headquarters in Geneva, the Japanese delegate blamed 'military hotheads' for the Manchurian incident, but the troops were not recalled.

Manchuria was the first big test for the League of Nations, and its first big failure. Although the League

demanded Japanese withdrawal from Manchuria, public opinion was so inflamed in Japan that the Imperial Government could not impose its authority on the army. Japan retained its 'spoils of war' and the province was renamed Manchukuo.

²Although reasons 1. & 2. were not enough to bring military dictatorship on themselves, when added to the powerful economic pressures following the Wall Street Crash in 1929, they helped bring it about.

Military Dictatorship (1931-41)

Following Prime Minister Inukai's criticism of the extremist action of the Japanese army he was assassinated, in May 1932, by a group of army officers.

Inukai's successor felt obliged to support the army's actions and from now on the army more or less ran the country.; The picture from now on was similar to that in Italy and Germany.

There followed:

1. Ruthless suppression of Communists
2. Assassination of opponents
3. Tight control over education
4. A build-up of armaments
5. An aggressive foreign policy which aimed to capture territory in Asia as:
 - (a) Markets for Japanese industrial products
 - (b) As sources of raw materials
 - (c) As 'living-space' for a growing and crowded population

Such an aggressive foreign policy led to the invasion of China in 1937 and the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941.

The Invasion of China (1937)

There were two main Japanese armies stationed on the Asiatic mainland in 1937. They were:

1. The Kwantung army (Kwantung was in Manchuria; and it was this army which had invaded the province in 1931)
2. A 7,000-strong garrison army at Fengtai, near Peking, just south of the Great Wall of China. The Japanese had occupied this area of China in 1936. It contained a railway network which the Japanese wished to develop.

Indeed, from 1933, the Japanese army began to spread from Manchuria into north-eastern China. By 1935-6, a large area of China as far as Peking had fallen under Japanese political, commercial and economic control.

The Chinese were powerless to stop this Japanese encroachment because China was torn by civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang forces and the communists (led by Mao Tse-Tung).

Trouble flared in the Fengtai-Peking area in 1937 because some Chinese landowners refused to sell key plots of land to the Japanese railway developers.

In retaliation, the Japanese applied pressure in the form of frequent and noisy army manoeuvres.

On 7th July 1937, during night manoeuvres by the Japanese army near the Marco Polo bridge, to the south of Peking, fighting broke out between Japanese and Chinese troops.

The Japanese army then seized the opportunity provided by this incident to invade the rest of China. By the Autumn of 1937, the Japanese had 150,000 troops in North China.

By the end of 1937, the Japanese had advanced up the Yangtze river to Nanking (the capital of Chiang Kai-shek's government).

By the Autumn of 1938, the Japanese had conquered Shanghai and Hankow..

They now extended their control in Southern China with the capture of Canton. However, the Japanese never achieved complete victory on China.

The Chinese nationalist and communist forces began to co-operate with each other against the Japanese invaders. On the eve of the Second World War, Japan controlled most of Eastern China and Chiang Kai-shek held the centre and the West.

A Japanese Empire in the East

When Europe became engulfed in war in 1939, the Japanese became concerned about the possible intentions of Hitler, their ally in the Anti-Comintern Pact.

What would Hitler do with the British, French, and Dutch colonies in South-east Asia (presuming he won the war)? Japan, therefore, decided that she must lose no time in staking a claim to these colonies herself.

French Indo-China and British Malaya were rich in rice, rubber, coal and tin; and the Dutch East Indies had a rich supply of oil.

This is just what Japan needed to boost her ailing industries with cheap raw materials.

The Japanese occupation of Manchuria and China (thought Japan) could be extended to provide one immense trading empire in which Japan would be the controlling nation.

In 1941, no European nation could do much to stop Japan achieving this dream (as they were embroiled in World War II).

Only the United States of America had a fleet strong enough to challenge the Japanese. In July 1941, Japan moved troops into French Indo China.

The threat to the rest of South-east Asia was now clear.

The United States Government immediately put a trade embargo on Japanese goods entering America and banned exports to Japan.

Pearl Harbour (December 1941)

The American trade embargo of 16th July 1941 was a crisis point in American-Japanese relations.

As a protest against Japanese aggression in China in 1937, the Americans denied aeroplanes, chemicals, iron, and aviation fuel to Japan.

Following the Japanese move into Indo-China in 1941, the Americans, British and Dutch ceased to supply Japan with oil.

Oil was the vital product of the embargo.

Japan imported 88% of her oil; 80% of which came from the United States.

The Japanese decided on drastic action.

On the morning of Sunday, 7th December 1941, Commander Itaya led the first formation of Japanese warplanes over the Hawaiian island of Oahu (where the American Pacific Fleet was harboured).

Itaya recorded:

“Pearl Harbor is still asleep in the morning mist.”

A few seconds before 7.55 a.m., the Japanese let loose their bombs on Pearl Harbor. There were 94 American ships in the harbour.

One eye-witness observed:

“Over this great fleet the forty Japanese torpedo-bombers broke like a storm just before eight o'clock. They came in from every direction, each pilot carefully briefed on the particular angle from which to launch his torpedo in order to get the best run and cause maximum confusion in the defence. Taking the gunners by complete surprise, they were almost impossible to hit; in a few moments the harbour was criss-crossed by the white wakes of their missiles, and tremendous explosions were leaping up against the steel sides of the battleships.”

By 8.30 a.m., the Oklahoma had capsized. The West Virginia had been sunk, the California was beginning to sink and the Arizona had blown up (killing $\frac{4}{5}$ of its crew of 1500).

Another four battleships were severely damaged.

When the Americans counted the cost it was found that 90% of their air and sea power in the mid-Pacific had been destroyed or immobilised.

In a speech to the American Congress, President Roosevelt called 7th December 1941 “a day that will live in infamy”. The ‘infamy’, of course, was because Japan had attacked without a declaration of war.

However, there is evidence to suggest that the Americans were not completely without warning of the Japanese attack.

1. As early as January 1941, J. C. Grew, the American Ambassador to Japan, warned Washington that an attack on Pearl Harbor was likely. U.S. Naval Intelligence received the message and recorded: "We have no credence [faith] in these rumours."
2. Two American privates manning a Radar station on the North shore of Oahu had twice reported seeing aircraft around 7 o'clock on 7th December. Their commanding officer took no action because he thought that they were American planes on routine exercises. Because of this error, 50 vital minutes for preventative action were lost.

NOTE: It has been postulated that the American government expected the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but did nothing to prevent it because they wanted the American public to be so outraged that the Roosevelt Government could enter the War on the side of Britain without opposition.

The Japanese claimed a total victory at Pearl Harbor. However, they missed two important targets:

1. They failed to search out and destroy several American aircraft carriers which were not far out of Pearl Harbor on routine exercises.
2. They neglected to bomb Pearl Harbor's oil-storage tanks and repair shops.

However, the damage was great enough to ensure that victory over Japan would not come quickly; and great enough to sway public opinion and give Roosevelt the chance to enter World War II.