

Militarism in Japan

Of all the countries that ventured down the path of totalitarianism, perhaps the most surprising was Japan. Unlike Italy, which felt cheated of its rightful prize, or Germany, suffering under what it felt to be the unfair peace of Versailles, Japan had emerged from World War I in a stronger position than it had been when the war started. During the war Japan, allied to Great Britain since 1902, had assisted the Allied Powers by gobbling up German colonies in the Pacific and along the Chinese coast with the promise that it would be allowed to keep them after the war and would be granted a seat at the Versailles Conference. Unlike Italy, Germany, or the Soviet Union, Japan had actually moved closer toward a more liberal, democratic political system in the 1920s, allowing full universal male voting in 1925.¹⁸ The key to this difference was that—unlike the other countries previously mentioned—Japan did not suffer the same economic turmoil or hardship during the decade after World War I. This economic prosperity contributed to an attempt by civilian politicians to lessen the traditional influence of the Japanese army and navy in political life.

There were, however, some important issues lurking just beneath the surface of Japanese society that help us understand why Japan's movements toward democracy faltered in the end. First was the long-standing problem of Japan's relationship with the West. Since the late 1500s, Japan had been faced with the choice between adopting Western approaches to government organization and industrial development and maintaining its own traditional approaches. Beginning with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japanese leaders opted for a middle ground between these two positions. This was done, though, with the idea of never sacrificing Japan's identity. Historian John Keegan notes that the "Japanese would not sell themselves or their society" for the sake of Western gadgets.¹⁹ This constant tug of war between tradition and westernization made Japan's relationship with the West sometimes very turbulent.

The second issue was the role of the navy and the army. These two groups often acted contrary to the wishes of the civilian government. Beginning in the 1930s, when the economic pressures of the Great Depression began to mount for Japan, the army, in particular, actively and openly sought to overturn the civilian government. Ultimately, it was the economic problems caused by the Great Depression that led Japan to adopt a government based on **militarism**—the idea that a country must maintain a strong military and utilize it to aggressively expand its place in the world or to defend itself from outside threats. By 1931, both of these factors were at work for the Japanese.

KEY EVENTS PRIOR TO 1937

In order to save Japan from economic ruin, army officials demanded that Japan expand into a portion of northeastern China known as **Manchuria**. Manchuria



Japanese troops march into Mukden on September 18, 1931.

bordered the Japanese-controlled colony of Korea and was targeted by the Japanese for its rich resources and critically important railroad network. By 1931, China was a very weak nation, without a strong central government that could effectively control the whole of the country. This meant that oftentimes local elites or local military officials ruled large sections of the country effectively on their own. This was the case in Manchuria, where **Chang Hsueh-liang** ruled outside the control of the Nationalist government of **Chiang Kai-shek**. The Japanese had troops stationed in Manchuria to protect their railroad network which supplied critical raw materials to the Japanese economy.

On September 18, 1931, Japanese army officials blew up a section of Japanese railroad and then blamed the incident on the forces of Chang. The **Mukden Incident**, as it became known, then served as a pretext for the Japanese army to invade and conquer the whole of Manchuria, a process completed by January 1932. In September of 1932, the Japanese established a new, independent country in place of Manchuria called **Manchukuo**. This new country, ruled by Puyi, the last ruler of the Qing dynasty, was really a puppet state under the effective control of the Japanese Army.

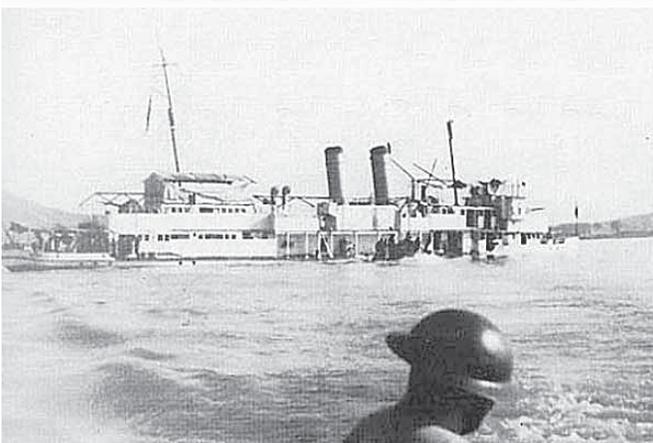
Back in Japan, a group of junior army officers attempted to overthrow the civilian-led government in 1936. Though the coup failed, it signaled the effective end of civilian control in Japanese political life and the ascendancy of the army and navy. The Japanese government, now openly fearful of the power of the Japanese military, used the period between 1932 and 1937 to prepare for a more wide-scale war against China as well as to se-



Section

III

THE WAR IN THE PACIFIC



The USS *Panay* sinks in the Yangtze River after a Japanese attack on December 12, 1937.

1937

The Invasion of China

In the popular imagination, the Allied war against Japan fits into a neatly organized storyline. The story begins with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, and is a war primarily comprised of a struggle between the United States and Imperial Japan, with the occasional appearance of other actors, such as Australia. The story ends neatly with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent Japanese surrender to the Allied powers on September 2, 1945. The reality of the situation is a far more complex and messy affair, as it often is when discussing history. Fighting in the Pacific never just encompassed the atolls and islands scattered across the ocean. Fighting on the Asian mainland was every bit as consequential to the outcome of the war.

An argument could be made for several points as starting dates for the war in the Far East. Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 could be just as valid an answer to the question as 1941. However, from the perspective of looking at the war in Asia and the Pacific as an orga-

nized effort by Japan designed to achieve very specific goals, it is best to begin with the expansion of Japan's effort against China in 1937. China made an inviting target at this time because of the ongoing civil war between China's Nationalist government and the Chinese Communist forces led by Mao Zedong. The Japanese invasion would produce a temporary truce between these two forces, but the direction of the war played a crucial role in Mao's ultimate victory over the Nationalists.

In the aftermath of Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the subsequent creation of the puppet state of Manchukuo, the Japanese military had absorbed nearby regions in the years that followed. However, these encroachments had generally been on a smaller scale and more restrained than the actions of 1931. This pattern changed drastically on July 7, 1937, with the **Marco Polo Bridge Incident**, when Japanese and Chinese troops clashed in the vicinity of the city of Peking (modern-day Beijing) near the Marco Polo Bridge. A Japanese unit on night maneuvers near the bridge found itself being fired on from a nearby Chinese unit. The Japanese unit returned fire, but this initial skirmish did not seem to be a major event; Japanese staff officers arranged a brief truce with the Chinese unit, and both sides agreed that the firing had been a mistake. At this exact moment, though, a second round of fire opened up on the Japanese troops, who immediately counterattacked through the night. The process would start over again in the morning as the Japanese units began to pull out of the area.

When news of the incident reached Tokyo, the initial reaction of the Japanese government was to let local officials on the spot sort it out. However, expansionist-minded officers in the Japanese Army argued that more Japanese troops had to be sent into China itself in order to prevent the Chinese from sensing weakness and perhaps considering an attack on Manchukuo itself, which could lead to a direct threat to Japanese-held Korea and then Japan itself.⁶² Tensions continued to mount in the area around Peking. Finally, on July 25, the minor skirmishing of the preceding days turned into a major con-

traditional Japanese claims in the Far East. The second was a more promising offer. Japan offered to stop its expansion in Southeast Asia and to eventually evacuate from the Dutch East Indies if the United States would drop its embargo and end supplies to China. The American government rejected both options and offered its own counter-proposal that called for a complete Japanese abandonment of China and Indochina as well as an end to the puppet state of Manchukuo. Not surprisingly, the Japanese government rejected this, and on December 4 the Japanese imperial government officially adopted a decision to go to war, with December 7 as the target date.

The success of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor can be partially attributed to the fumbling of the American military in both Washington and on the ground at Pearl Harbor. By late 1941, American intelligence had cracked the top Japanese diplomatic codes, a project known as **Magic**, which gave American planners knowledge of Japan's decision to implement a deadline for war. This, coupled with the sheer volume of Japanese military radio traffic, should have alerted the Americans to an upcoming assault. While this is true, it is too simple to just claim that the American military missed the mark here. What Magic and other radio intelligence gave was a broad outline of Japanese intentions, one that was painfully short on details of where and when. One must also acknowledge the careful planning and precise execution of the plan carried out by the Japanese Navy.

On the morning of Sunday, December 7, 1941, six of the Japanese Navy's eight carriers arrived undetected off of the northern coast of the island of Oahu. Two waves of torpedo bombers, dive-bombers, level bombers, and fighters would be employed in the attack. The first wave of 183 craft focused on the destruction of the American Army Air Corps airfields at Hickam, Wheeler, Bellows, and Mokuleia fields along with the Marine Corps airfields Ewa and Kaneohe Bay. A final target in the first wave was the Naval Air Station at Ford Island. American craft numbered close to four hundred, of which 188 were destroyed and 159 damaged. The second wave, constituting 170 craft, was launched an hour after the first and focused on the American naval vessels at anchor, especially the eight American battleships there. This second wave found its targets obscured by smoke and encountered far greater anti-aircraft fire than the first wave had. Despite this, the Japanese managed to permanently sink two of the American battleships and significantly damage the other six. Only eight of the thirty-eight cruisers and destroyers at anchor were damaged. In total, nearly 2,400 Americans were killed in the attack, the vast majority being the sailors and Marines killed in the sinking of the battleships *Arizona* and *Oklahoma*, and almost 1,200 were wounded. The Japanese lost only twenty-nine aircraft.⁷⁰

The attack had achieved its immediate goal of elimi-

nating the Pacific Fleet as a threat, but in the long run, the attack on Pearl Harbor was not the victory the Japanese had hoped for. First, many of the vessels damaged were repaired and would see significant action in the Pacific fighting. Second, the Japanese failed to damage the crucial repair facilities and fuel dumps at Pearl Harbor. Third, the three American aircraft carriers in the Pacific were all at sea during the attack. This ensured that the American Navy would maintain its ability to strike back against the Japanese in the Pacific. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the attack on Pearl Harbor was the deathblow to an already weakened isolationist movement. The Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor galvanized the American public into widespread support for American entry into war.

Offensive in the Far East

Within hours of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces throughout Southeast Asia and the Central Pacific launched attacks on American and British possessions. These attacks aimed to provide the Japanese with a defensible line and were made in preparation for the attack on the Dutch East Indies and its vast oil reserves. Most of the smaller possessions of the Allied powers fell quickly to the Japanese. **Guam**, part of the Mariana Island chain, was attacked on December 8 and fell after only two days of fighting. **Hong Kong**, the main British possession in China, held out longer, resisting Japanese advances until December 25, after which Japanese forces, enraged by the British resistance, went on a murderous rampage through the British and Chinese populations of the colony.

In other spots, however, Allied forces put up a tougher fight, which forced the Japanese to respond accordingly. On **Wake Island**, two thousand miles west of Hawaii, American Marines and civilians defeated the initial Japanese effort to seize the island on December 8, when coastal artillery sank or damaged six Japanese ships. Two weeks later, the Japanese returned in greater force and seized the island at the cost of a thousand casualties.⁷¹ Japanese forces also moved quickly to occupy neutral **Thailand** in order to gain a foothold for the larger operations against British-held **Burma** and **Malaya**. Elements of the Japanese Twenty-Fifth Army made several landings along the Thai coast and also struck overland from their bases in Indochina beginning on December 8. Within a week, the Thai government had signed an armistice with the Japanese that would allow Japanese forces passage through Thailand as well as a secret protocol for a Thai declaration of war against the Western powers. The main Japanese invasion of Burma would not begin until the following month, January 1942, but the seizure of Thailand put Japan in a favorable position.

The main Japanese efforts in December 1941 were aimed at British Malaya and the major naval base at Singapore and at the American presence in the Philippines. **General Tomoyuki Yamashita**, who faced a numerical-





U.S. Marines fire against Japanese cave positions in the north face of Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

costly—with casualty estimates reaching 10,000—but the advantages of the having Iwo Jima under American control outweighed those concerns.

The defense of Iwo Jima fell to the 21,000-man garrison under the command of Lieutenant General Kuribayashi Tadamichi, who had been brought in from Manchuria to oversee the defense of the islands. Kuribayashi, like Yamamoto, had spent time in the United States and had a healthy respect for both the fighting ability of the American soldiers as well as the overwhelming firepower the American military could bring to bear. To negate this advantage, he used the natural terrain of Iwo Jima, constructing a massive system of interconnecting caves, tunnels, bunkers, and covered trenches that gave the Japanese defense a strong fixed position that could not be flanked. Kuribayashi also ordered that all positions would be held to the last man and forbade the wasteful suicide charges that had become more commonplace among Japanese troops in the last years of the fighting.

Preparation for the invasion had begun as early as October 1944, when Iwo Jima began to come under regular bombardment by American aircraft. In preparation for the actual landing, the American Navy would provide four days of pre-landing naval support fire. Ordinarily, this amount of munitions would have leveled any fortification or obstacle, but Iwo Jima was no ordinary island. It was a massive volcanic rock dominated by the sheer stone walls of **Mount Suribachi**, which looked out over the whole of the island and gave the Japanese there an immense defensive advantage. During the four days of naval fire, the Japanese garrison simply went underground and waited for the firing to cease. In the end, the preparatory shelling had almost no effect on weakening



The U.S. flag flies atop Mount Suribachi after U.S. forces gained control of that part of Iwo Jima.

the Japanese position on the island.

The first elements of the 4th and 5th Marine Divisions came ashore on February 19, 1945. Initially, the Japanese did not open fire, waiting until the Marines, nearly 10,000 in total, had made landfall. It was not until the Marines began to make their way up the loose, black volcanic sand shore that the Japanese opened a deluge of cannon, mortar, and machine gun fire, coming from seemingly every direction onto the Americans. Despite being pinned down, the American foothold on Iwo Jima was secure by the end of the day, which saw roughly 30,000 men ashore. The morning of February 20 saw the Marines begin their assault on Suribachi while other forces moved northeasterly to seize the rest of the island.

The advance over the next three days was often measured in yards, as the Japanese defense proved to be exceptionally hard to crack. The Marines made extensive use of dynamite charges and flamethrowers to clear out the bunkers constructed by the Japanese. By the end of the third day, a small patrol from the 28th Marines reached the summit of Suribachi and raised a small American flag, which could be seen from the whole of the island. This moment, captured on film by photogra-