

Japan's Inevitable Road to War

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Japan's history has always been an interest of mine. This interest was satisfied when I enrolled in a Japanese history class at Coastal Carolina University. It focused on Japan from its Tokugawa Era through the end of the second World War. One thing that was constant throughout this time in Japan was the internal debate over the direction of the government. Japan has experienced instability, assassinations, and battles against modernization and trade with the West. These struggles eventually snowballed into Japan entering World War II.

I conducted the research to by reading primary and secondary sources from the beginning of the 20th century onward from Japan. These included political statements, laws, treaties, etc. A secondary source I used an unpublished manuscript by John Moser, *Japan, the West, and the Road to War: Game Book*. In my Japanese history class, we used this manuscript to play a "Reacting to the Past" role playing game about Japan entering the war. In this "game" we were assigned roles within the Japanese government such as bureaucrats, army and navy, and the zaibatsu. We debated Japan's leadup to the war and how it could have changed. I created this project in the form of an essay explaining the leadup to Japan's involvement in the second World War. My historical argument is that these unstable diplomatic times, along with heated internal debates within in Japan led to the rise of ultra-nationalist ideals amongst both the governing bodies of Japan and the military. Entering the early 1900s, Japan became involved in an internal debate between the moderate faction (the doves) and the faction of the ultranationalists (the hawks). The moderations wanted to be friendly and engage in trade with the west, while the "war-hawks" wanted to colonize Asia and have no dealings with the West. The historical significance of this paper is to analyze the diplomatic issues within and how they led to war for Japan. Also, Japan's involvement in World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor specifically

directly led US involvement in the War. America's involvement in the war eventually ended in America dropping two atomic bombs on the country of Japan, the first and only time nuclear weapons have been used in warfare. Beyond this, a complete reset occurred in Japan on all levels. American occupation limited offensive military capabilities we still see today in Japan.

Japan in 1940 could have easily avoided war with the United States but there was an internal debate between the “doves” and the “hawks.” Unfortunately as we all know, the hawks won and war broke out.

In the years before the breakout of World War II, Japan had been divided. Two main groups were in a constant struggle for influence in the country. The “hawks”, or the Japanese Army and Navy were hungry for war. Japan had began a venture in colonialism in the first half of the 20th century and wanted more. Even before they officially entered WWII, they were taking European holdings in Asia while the nations were too busy fighting off the Nazi invasion of European territories such as Poland. This went on with little to no consequence and sanctions from the League of Nations until Japan’s involvement in China, particularly Manchukuo. Manchukuo was an attempt by the Japanese to establish an independent state within China. The second group, or the “doves” were the Zaibatsu and the bureaucrats of Japan, and even some members of the Imperial Court, such as Konoe Fumimaro¹. The Zaibatsu were owners of large companies who gave countless amounts of Yen to the Japanese military and government. In fact, it is the Zaibatsu who funded the Meiji Restoration in Japan.² The Zaibatsu’s greatest success occurred during the Great War, when they exported copious amounts of consumer goods to the rest of the world. While the rest of the world’s greatest powers were exclusively manufacturing war materials, they kept to themselves and made a fortune. Japan had found levels of prosperity and joy like never before and it seemed like it was only going to get better.³ Another outcome of the Great Depression led the Japanese Army to first invade Manchuria for land and resources.

¹ Gordon Mark Berger. *Parties Out of Power in Japan*. Ann Arbor: Univ Microfilms Intl, 1977. 130.

² John E. Moser. *Japan, the West, and the Road to War: Game Book*. Unpublished manuscript. 2013

³ Major exports during WWI allowed Japan’s economy to be opened to the World market and living standards dramatically improved. "Zaibatsu," *Kōdansha. Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*. Volume 9 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983). 361-363.

This ended for Japan after the United States began heavy sanctions on the country as a result of their actions in in southeast Asia, specifically in China. After American sanctions, the rest of the Western world followed. And hatred for the West sparked in Japan. People like Kita Ikki began advocating for anti-western policy within Japan. Ikki's most famous work "An Outline Plan for the Reorganization of Japan" was written in 1919 and he was later executed for his supposed involvement in the 2/26 incident.⁴ The "doves" wanted nothing to do with this and saw positive relations with the West as the only way for Japan to survive.

Ultrnationalist ideas came about and the hawks thought Japan had lost its way, corrupted by the western influences and ideas. The imperial way faction of the Army wanted their own form of a Meiji Restoration, and ultrnationalists and military figures strongly supported this. This was eventually referred to as the Showa Restoration among the hawks. The Diet was abolished and so were political parties. According to the government, this was all due to people like the doves because of their support of western ideas and influence. According the hawks, doves had tainted Japan as a whole by bringing in western influence because of greed the western money brought in. This was certainly not true in the eyes of the doves, they loved their country and people. The hawks began wanting a "New Order" in Japan where the country was respected throughout the world and took what it wanted. This was to happen by conquering, if necessary, all of East Asia for its abundance of natural resources. The only problem with this is that most of the Western world already possesses most of the territory in the region. This caused the Japanese government to believe it was their job to liberate East Asia from colonization.

⁴ An Outline Plan for the Reorganization of Japan, found in Brij Tankha, *Kita Ikki and the Making of Modern Japan: A Vision of Empire* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007). 272-276.

Ironically enough, Japan's method to protect East Asia from colonization was more or less to colonize it themselves.

While the west, specifically the United States were suffering from a depression in the 1930s, it allowed the war hawks of Japan to do as they pleased. This is what eventually led to the invasion of China in 1931 and the later creation of Manchukuo of 1932. Japan interfered with western commerce in China. Then the Sino-Japanese War led to Japan creating the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere in an effort to push western imperialism out of Asia. The United States had considerable trading interests in China and could not afford destabilization due to conflict. The doves knew this would lead to crippling sanctions from America and the rest of the west and tried everything to stop the hawks from continuing acts of aggression in European and other Asian holdings. With the hawks scrambling for war and money for military spending, the doves just wanted peaceful trade relations with the west. After the National General Mobilization Law of 1938, the new "hawk" led government was taking action to ensure ruined relationships with the western superpowers like the United States. The doves knew that with the continuance of aggression in China, war with the west was on the horizon. The Soviet Union had now signed a pact with China and the looming threat of communism making its way into Japan along with threat of war was the last thing needed in the country.

Perhaps the biggest debate going on within Japan was the idea that the West had bullied Japan and the rest of Asia into doing what they wanted. This of course was the opinion of the hawks. The doves debated the opposite. Bringing in western influence and building trade relationships with the western powers like the United States was just what Japan needed. American diplomacy in particular had negative connotations with the hawks of Japan, dating back to the Perry Expedition in 1853. Specifically, Japan had thought the West had bullied them

into the trade agreements set in previous years, after America pulled out of East Asian holdings only to return later on. The hawks took this as a sign of disrespect by coming back after they thought they could have benefit in Japan again. On top of this, America had long supported China over Japan, and that is why the risk of war was high. Many of Japan's leaders in government openly resented American interference in China. However, many citizens of the country do not support hostile action towards the Americans. Citizens and government alike in Japan were always open in these debates. They all knew the capabilities of the American military and the sheer industrial might they had and knew the end would be bad for Japan. The hawks and doves of Japan needed to make peace.

The "dove" group of Japan felt that the future of the country depended on peace and not war. Interfering with agreements with the West such as the Nine-Power Pact and the "Open Door Policy." Article III of the Nine-Power Pact specifically states that the contracting powers not seek, nor support "any arrangement which might purport to establish in favour of their interests any general superiority of rights with respect to commercial or economic development in any designated region of China."⁵ Japan violated this treaty ten-fold with its actions in China. They obviously focused more on self-interest than the betterment of all nine nations in this pact, which was also in direct violation of the Nine-Power Pact.⁶ They believed that first, Japan must pull all military out of their Chinese holdings and allow China to return to providing the "fullest and most unembarrassed opportunity to China to develop and maintain for herself an effective and stable government."⁷ This action immediately would put Japan on somewhat better terms with

⁵ Nine-Power Pact. February 6th, 1922 as found in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* volume 1. 1922. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office

⁶ Nine-Power Pact, Article I Part 3

⁷ Nine-Power Pact, Article I

the West. Relationships with the United States specifically should greatly improve, lowering chances for war exponentially. They also believed that if the Imperial Rule Assistance Association is given the reigns, military rule will dominate Japan. Arguably the most important action of all was to maintain a long-term and beneficial trade deal with Japan that worked for all involved.

The “hawk” groups ideas were on the other end of the spectrum. They were focused on protecting the honor and independence of Japan. They thought about the Japanese men who had died in China and believed that pulling out now was the last option. They would be dishonored. They also believed that Japan would be doomed to be a European colony without proving its power through colonization of its own. However, most of the funding for war came from the members of the “dove” faction, as many of them were members of the Zaibatsu class. They knew that it did not matter how much spirit or perseverance one had, a fighting spirit couldn’t win a war the way money could. Japan also did not have the natural resources or cash in hand to compete with the United States. Because of this, Japan’s loss was almost set in stone.

In a predictable contrast, the internationalist bureaucrats, or the “doves” felt that ending these hostile relations with the United States would be the key to overall happiness and prosperity amongst the citizens and government of Japan. While the citizens of Japan respected their government and honor of the country, they knew they could not win a war against a global superpower such as America. The dove faction felt another benefit of this outcome would be the influx of new ideas and culture from the western world. Japan long thought of foreign influence as public enemy one but in all reality, this way of thinking did more harm than good. Japan had been closed off from the outside world for over 200 years (1600-1853) and nothing good came from it. The rest of the world industrialized and advanced while Japan stuck to themselves. As a

result, they were “frozen in time.” They were at one point decades behind the West. Fukuzawa Yukichi, perhaps one of the biggest figures in the history of Japanese modernization, toured the West before the Meiji Restoration in order to gain knowledge on how the west operated and from early on he recognized the stark differences between the two sides of the world.⁸ He knew, unlike many within the country that Japan stood no chance against the modern militaries of the west. This embarrassing fact was confirmed when former US Secretary of State Seward visited Japan. He toured the entire country with leaders of government and told them that in its present condition there was no way the country would stay independent. Fukuzawa showed his contempt for this idea in his editorial, “Good-bye Asia.” In this article, he discusses how like Japan, China and Korea may be doomed to become colonies of the west due to the “backwards” nature of society and government in the country. Japan’s leaders knew it was time for a change, and at their very core clashed with ideas of becoming one with the rest of the world.

Internal debates between the “hawk” faction of the military and the “dove” faction consisting of internationalists and Zaibatsu ultimately led to Japan entering World War II. Conflict from within can be more harmful to a nation than any foreign power and Japan’s pre-war actions and debates are an excellent example of this.

⁸ Lack of diplomatic experience and even political parties in Japan was a stark difference to what Yukichi witnessed on his tour of the west. Fukuzawa Yukichi, and Eiichi Kiyooka. *The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Annotated Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES:

Current, Richard N. "The Stimson Doctrine and the Hoover Doctrine," *American Historical Review* Vol. 59, No. 3 (Apr., 1954), pp. 513–542

The Stimson Doctrine was one of the many diplomatic responses from the United States regarding Japan's pre-war actions. This proclamation in particular was to denounce the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. This was also used by the doves as proof Japan needed to rethink their actions for the sake of diplomacy

Fukuzawa, Yukichi, and Eiichi Kiyooka. *The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

This autobiography is rich in information and opinions from one of Japan's leading figures. He discusses his life experiences touring and studying the west and the contempt he received upon returning to Japan. He discusses also the alarming opinions of western leaders and diplomats when they arrived in Japan. He was in favor of western influence.

Nine-Power Pact. February 6th, 1922 as found in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* volume 1. 1922. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office

This is used as a way to show many of the diplomatic agreements broken by Japan in the 1930s leading up to them entering the war.

Reilly, Kevin. "Good-Bye Asia." in *Worlds of History: A Comparative Reader. Volume Two, Volume Two*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007.

Written by Fukuzawa Yukichi, it is his opinion on what will occur if Japan stays the same. He believed it will be doomed to become a colony of the West, along with Korea and China. It is to show the opinion of the "dove" faction and how they used it in their debates within the country.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Brij Tankha, *Kita Ikki and the Making of Modern Japan: A Vision of Empire* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

This is a work about Kita Ikki and his role in modernizing Japan. In this secondary source, a primary source from Kita Ikki titled “An Outline Plan for the Reorganization of Japan” was used to illustrate the ultranationalist ideas persisting throughout Japan at the time. His works were used as a “bible” of sorts amongst Japanese ultranationalists.

Berger, Gordon Mark. *Parties Out of Power in Japan*. Ann Arbor: Univ Microfilms Intl, 1977.

This is a book about the pre-war years for Japan. In particular, it focuses on the diet, political parties, and the zaibatsu. In particular, I used this book as a way to illustrate who the “doves” and zaibatsu specifically were.

Kōdansha. *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983.

This is an in-depth, academic encyclopedia of Japan and was used in particular to illustrate the power and influence of the Zaibatsu in pre-war Japan.

Moser, John E. *Japan, the West, and the Road to War: Game Book*. Unpublished manuscript.

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This was used in our 300-level college course as a Reacting to the Past guidebook. Reacting to the Past is a developing “game” developed through Barnard College. It includes, primary sources, explanations of the different factions and debates going on in Japan at the time. It offers insight into Japan and the political factions from within in 1940.