

Why japan went to war in the pacific history essay



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On December 7/8, 1941, Japan started the Pacific War. When deciding to wage war, the national strength of the would-be aggressor and its target(s) must be analysed carefully. Considering the industrial production capabilities of Japan and the U. S., one can only conclude that going to war would be utter folly. Yet Japan still did so, hoping to quell economic insecurity and realise imperialistic ambitions by establishing an autarkic empire.

Historians of this era generally attribute Japan's economic insecurity to a lack of natural resources, a rise in protectionism and an increasing population.

[2]However, it can be argued that the military build-up created an artificial shortage of natural resources with the surge in demand for war goods from resource-guzzling heavy industries. Moreover, the mainly foreign supply of natural resources was still adequate until the total embargo following Japan's takeover of Indochina. The solution then, was to secure these commodities by conquest of Southeast Asia. Emigration of Japanese to conquered territories was not only to alleviate the burgeoning population but also for colonisation purposes.[3]

When examining at Japan's imperial ambitions, it is crucial to see how the majority of the nation was swept up into territorial expansionism at all levels; in the military and population, and how the civilian government was influenced into sanctioning the war. It is also essential to understand how Japan felt alienated from the international community by racist overtures, particularly from Allied nations, undermining what Japan felt were rightful and cardinal interests.

Thus, it can be seen that the aforementioned reasons for Japan to embark on its Pacific Campaign were created by external and internal parties, some with the intention of insinuating expansionism and aggression. As such, this paper seeks to explain the underlying causes of these reasons identified as the following: international racism, nationalism, the triumph of military supremacy over civilian authority and the prevalent popularity of the Nanshin-ron (Southern Expansion Doctrine). In particular, we assert that the presence of a strong military with control over the civilian government was the main cause behind the ignition of the Pacific War.

Racial Discrimination from the West

The road to war in the Pacific arguably has its roots in racism from the West. Distinction of race, particularly between Asian and Western races, became a serious rationale for acknowledgement of national power and status.[4]Japan had known for a long time, since Commodore Perry's gunboat diplomacy, about the gross power disparity between itself and the U. S. which continued to grow. In 1941, Major Kametaro Tominaga of the War Ministry's Press Bureau delivered a speech stating that the Manchurian Incident and the China Affair were race wars to liberate Oriental races from oppression by the West.[5]Thus, it can be seen that racism had a part in guiding the decision to begin armed conflict.

Japan's Attempts at Legislating Racial Equality are Rebuffed

Having no peer then, Japan sought to gain recognition as a great power and equal from the West to allay its own feelings of insecurity. This desire to be seen and treated as an equal by the West manifested itself in efforts to seek

assurances in legislation from the leading international body of the time: the League of Nations. Two serious attempts to achieve this failed however. The first was Japan's proposal to the League in 1911 requesting that there should be no discrimination based on race or nationality in law which was not passed.[6] Later that year, Japan proposed a racial equality amendment to the League's covenant and met with the same result.[7] Japan's persistent endeavors to obtain assurances of racial equality from the West were not reciprocated and racism perpetuated on a national scale subsequently influenced treatment of Japanese immigrants in the U. S.

Racial Discrimination towards Japanese Immigrants

Anti-Japanese attitudes in the American West Coast were further influenced by an anti-Japanese campaign in 1905 and the passing of the Californian Alien Land Law in 1913 which restricted Japanese 'aliens' from purchasing and leasing land.[8] The 1924 Immigration Act that labeled Japanese immigrants as undesirable only served to aggravate the situation.[9] These actions arguably raised the likelihood of war in the Pacific as Japan would be less likely to acquiesce to U. S. demands given such humiliating treatment. It also augmented the view that the U. S. was willing to forfeit relations with Japan to preserve racial superiority and Western hegemony.

Racism in Preferential National Treatment

Japan violated the Open Door Policy, where various powers agreed to share access to China and that none should take control, when it took over Southern Manchuria following its victory in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. This Policy was used to apply pressure on Japan but not on Britain and France to withdraw from their colonies.[10] This was seen to be grossly racist

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as Japan was not deemed worthy to have colonies despite having proven its military capabilities and having helped the Allies in World War I.

The Washington Naval Treaty that came soon after was seen as a malicious effort to blunt Japanese naval expansion. The treaty restricted each signatory's total tonnage of capital ships, but what is noteworthy is the ratio of 5: 5: 3 between the U. S., Britain and Japan.[11]Restrictions were further extended in the 1930 London Naval Conference where Japan had to comply with a 10: 6 ratio; while on the Japan side, it was felt that a 10: 7 ratio was the minimum required for national security.[12]This enforced limitation by the West was likely to forestall Japan from expanding its sphere of influence but it was seen as an act of racial discrimination in Japan which infuriated its leaders and the military.

Racism – An Underestimated Factor

Persisting traditional racial hierarchal mindsets despite Japanese achievements and successes on economic and military fronts resulted in acts viewed as discriminatory by many Japanese leaders, both civilian and military. This general antagonistic sentiment in leadership would greatly lower the propensity to reach any settlement with the U. S. and would be projected to the general populace to gain support for the war later on by acting as a champion for the liberation of Asia.

Nationalism – Winning over the Masses

While international racism was a key external factor in propagating imperialistic notions in Japan, it is just one side of the story. To quote Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer's doctrine, before the world could achieve a stage

of industrialized and enlightened civilization, it must engage in a militant selection process that promised survival to the fittest races and nations.

[13]Darwinist ethics first became popularised in the Meiji era with the idea of survival of the fittest creating the national mentality that Japan was either the colonial master or the oppressed colony, thereby providing a logical justification for expansionism and creating the foundations for Japanese nationalism.

The Paradigm Shifts of Nationalism

Japan's national outlook evolved from one of fearful apprehension in the Meiji era to that of confidence and control in the Taisho era and took a nosedive once again when the Great Depression hit in 1929. The economic crisis was further compounded by protectionist measures by Western nations leading to a rise in jingoism. Nationalism manifested itself in this period in public calls for better economic conditions and labour strikes owing to stark circumstances with rising inflation, widespread unemployment and bankruptcy of small firms.

Politicians took most of the blame due to their inefficacy to implement effective policies to remedy the situation. The majority of the population was so disillusioned with the government that they were willing to listen to any organization with a half-reliable alternative.[14]Many intellectuals, being disconcerted with the situation in Japan then, began advocating iconoclastic ideologies which led to two intrinsic forms of nationalism.

The National Reconstruction Plan

Of the two, one was less reactionary and comprised mainly a national reconstruction plan that sought to suppress discontent and preserve basic societal aspects of Japan. The plan was first proposed by Ikki Kita, a member of the Black Dragon Society, and soon gained much approbation from the general populace due to the potency of public outreach campaigns, owing to the help of influential nationalist societies and sympathetic individuals. Notable examples would be the Heavenly Swords society as well as Zei Nishida who helped tout the principles of the plan within the military.[15]

The Genesis of Ultra-nationalism

The second form of nationalism followed a more fundamentalist route into ultra-nationalism. The 1932 assassination of Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai, who was seen as anti-military, by members of the Emperor Jimmu Society resulted in appointment of militarist successors who took proactive steps to propel ultra-nationalism. One prominent example would be the spiritual mobilization program for Japan that utilised political, religious and educational institutions as well as all channels of communication and entertainment media to spread nationalistic propaganda throughout the nation.[16] Each ministry had its own intelligence bureau and every prefecture had a central information bureau responsible for the gathering, appraisal, and dispersion of all information within and without of Japan, thereby creating a comprehensive information network under tight governmental control.

All publicly registered organizations were strong-armed into forming a single body to aid the directing of the peoples' thoughts and attitudes.[17]The

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government set guidelines for the media and all sorts of art forms and used various avenues for indoctrination purposes. These moves were validated by the government on grounds of uniting all members of the nation in one spirit and promote consolidation of their spiritual life.[18]Freedom of speech was also greatly restricted with heavy censorship of movie films, newspapers and radio programs by the information bureau.

An Appraisal of Japanese Nationalism

Japanese nationalism began brewing since modernization and simmered until the Great Depression, where widespread economic hardship gave rise to radical thought. Expansionism and the projection of power beyond Japanese borders to safeguard national interests gained more sway. Incursion into peoples' lives allowed the nation's leaders to integrate the population into a largely homogeneous entity by guiding public opinion and weeding out dissident elements. The permeation of ultra-nationalism into Japanese society prevented less hardline figures from taking leadership and further embittered Japan-U. S. relations. The succeeding section will look at how expansionism and military rule took root leading up to the Pacific War.

The Triumph of Military Supremacy over Civilian Authority

About a decade before fascist Japan would embark on its Pacific Campaign, it was undergoing rather liberal trends during the Taisho period. What is important here is that the institutional structure of the state, the Meiji Constitution, remained largely unchanged throughout these periods.[19]As such, the cause of this drastic transition can be argued to be the socio-economic and authority changes in Japan.

Problems of the Political Parties in the Taisho Period

While political parties represented most social groups, the zaibatsu were the parties' main backers, owing to ties with the Meiji oligarchs.[20] Politics then was merely pandering to whichever faction or class held most influence and bearing. The Taisho period was one of economic prosperity and peace, resulting in a growing middle class, who with the zaibatsu saw the military as an unnecessary money sink. Thus, political parties executed anti-military policies such as reducing military spending,[21]and subsequently lowering taxes to appeal to the general populace.

Extremism of Young Officers

Examples of such policies would be the Yamanashi and Ugaki disarmaments in 1922 and 1925 respectively which destroyed many young officers' careers and futures through staff reduction,[22]fostering enmity towards the civilian government that it came to be seen as an anathema amongst the young officers.

Consolidation of Government under Military Leadership

With the Great Depression, the troubled but still growing economy went into free-fall.[23]In these tumultuous times, the military was seen as a champion by various social groups. To the peasants, they offered land in Manchuria. To the middle class, they were seen as a viable alternative to the corrupt and unrepresentative political parties. And for the zaibatsu, linking up with the military was logical, as the military gained more political clout and became a major patron of the heavy industries the zaibatsu were shifting focus towards.[24]

Active measures were also taken by the military to undermine the civilian government. Senior officers led by Kanji Ishiwara in the Toseiha (The Imperial Way Faction) permitted a rebellion, known later as the February 26 Incident, by the rival Kodoha (Control Faction), composed primarily of younger officers, to take place.[25] This allowed them to establish their dominance in the army by suppressing the rebellion and command a superior position vis-à-vis the government. The army, heavily influenced by German fascism, [26] pushed for one-party rule resulting in the Taisei Yokusankai (the Imperial Rule Assistance Association). In the end, most lawmakers left their parties to retain any remaining political leverage they could under this initiative.

Expansionism Wins – Influence of Young Officers

Once in power, Ishiwara pushed for non-expansionism in favour of long-term domestic development to prepare for war against the U. S. and the Soviet Union.[27] However, such efforts were rendered obsolete by the success of Ishiwara's own machinations in Manchuria earlier and the continuing spread of extremism in the military.

For instigating the Mukden Incident, not only was Ishiwara not punished for initiating military action without sanction, he and other co-conspirators were promoted and decorated,[28] setting a precedent for and popularising gekokujo, a Japanese term referring to acts of insubordination and disobedience of younger officers. The spread of extremism was not stemmed after the February 26 Incident as some participants were not punished and sent to the frontlines where they could pursue their extremist ideals.

Evaluation of the Establishment of Military Dominance

Failure by the political parties to enact constitutional changes paved the way for the military to abuse the system to gain political influence. Once the military was in power, individual radical behaviour overran national rational strategies as there was no way for the military to stop subversive elements within itself when the civilian government had failed earlier. A similar movement happened in the navy,[29]giving rise to two separate extremist divisions in the military with expansionist goals. The following section will look at how the Nanshin-ron's popularity came about with the influence of the navy among other factors.

The Prevalent Popularity of the Nanshin-ron

The popularity of the Nanshin-ron is another momentous cause for beginning armed conflict in the Pacific. Its inception began in the 1900s with intense discourse on the diverging theories of Hokushu Nanshin (northern defense and southern advance) and Nanshu Hokushin (southern defense and northern advance) which came to be known as the Nanshin-ron and the Hokushin-ron (Northern Expansion Doctrine) which won the majority support of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) and Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) respectively.[30]

IJN Rise to Ascendancy

The IJA had already been losing its dominion as it was unable to get out of the quagmire created by the 1937 Sino-Japanese War.[31]The IJN were then able to attain ascendancy in the military allowing it to gain sway over national decisions following the Nomonhan Incident where IJA offensives against the USSR yielded dire losses with no territorial gains[32]resulting in <https://assignbuster.com/why-japan-went-to-war-in-the-pacific-history-essay/>

great loss of standing for the IJA and its leaders. This led to the signing of the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact which helped generate the Nazi-Soviet Pact that further weakened grounds for the IJA's Hokushin-ron.

Allure of Economic Security

Japan's interest in the south was also sparked by territorial gains in the Pacific from the occupation of former German colonies following its participation in World War I. Japan had established regional supremacy after its victory in the Russo-Japanese War. However, it lacked raw materials in its controlled territories, especially oil which was paramount for Japan's economy.[33] Substantial reliance on U. S. oil imports created a dilemma for Japan when the oil embargo was imposed[34] which led Japan to covet the oil-rich Dutch East Indies.

Expansionism and Advancement into Southeast Asia and the Pacific

Expansionism also drove Japan to look south. Japan felt that the victory in the Russo-Japanese war was meaningless as the South Seas was still controlled by the West[35] and began increasing its presence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific region by promoting and establishing free trade. The oil embargo imposed by the U. S. mentioned earlier severely inhibited Japan's ability to mount long-term military operations in even one direction let alone two. By then, the IJN had already established its dominance in national decisions and directed preparations for southern offensives after securing the Manchukuo border with the Soviet-Japanese Pact.

Another supporting factor would be the opportunity to use the Micronesian archipelago as 'unsinkable aircraft carriers'[36] to defend Japan against the inevitable counter-offensive from the U. S. This was fortified by the increasing importance of aviation in warfare then.

Integrality of Southeast Asia and the Pacific to Japan

The popularity of the Nanshin-ron came about as a result of the prospects for further economic development and attaining economic security from the conquest of Southeast Asia which would provide much needed commodities as well as markets for Japanese exports. Ventures into Southeast Asia actualized these prospects with copious gains especially for the shipping and manufacturing industries and creating entrepreneurship opportunities[37] such as the lucrative plantations in Malaya and Indonesia. [38] The southern natural resource bounties eventually became seen as a lifeline following the U. S. embargo. With the Japan-Soviet neutrality pact removing Siberia from the equation, it was almost certain that Japan would have to move south without acceding to U. S. demands to extricate itself from China.

Conclusion

Looking at the factors discussed, it is clear that all were intricately linked. A desire for recognition by the West as a great power and an equal arising from a national inferiority complex dating back to the Meiji era provided the base for imperialistic ambitions. Denial of this recognition as well as real and perceived anti-Japanese actions by the West served to fan the flames of nationalism used to galvanise the nation. Its fledgling economy was extremely vulnerable to supply and demand shocks, making Southeast Asia

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with its large markets and vast resources very desirable, propelling the Nanshin-ron's popularity.

Nevertheless, all this may not have come into play if not for expansionist military leaders' subjugation of the government. The financial capital for exorbitant military procurement which forced the drastic industrial shift driving the demand for commodities was acquired through subversion of civilian authority where rapidly ballooning military budgets, swelling to 2 billion yen in the 72nd Diet session, were passed unopposed.[39]

During war operations planning, reports on Japan's national strength and operational outcomes were presented by the Naval General Staff's Operations Bureau and the Cabinet Planning Board in a way to make war with the U. S. seem viable.[40]Furthermore, it can be contended that Fumimaro Konoe, Prime Minister in the period preceding the Pacific War, could have secured a peace settlement with the U. S. if not for then War Minister, Hideki Tojo's absolute refusal to withdraw troops from China. [41]This led to a breakdown in negotiations as the U. S. had dictated in the Hull note that Japan was to withdraw all forces from China and Indochina.[42] Hence, it is clear that while all factors discussed played a role in creating conditions instrumental to armed aggression, expansionist military dominance over national decision making was what ultimately culminated in Japan beginning the Pacific War.

Will Japan ever Wage another War?

Looking at the present, Japan's status is currently built on its economic, financial and technological superiority, of which the first two are being

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eroded by economic stagnation with no end in sight.[43]Bilateral relations with most Asia-Pacific nations have been largely normalised. Nevertheless, a whole repertoire of territorial sticklers along with periodic controversy on history revisionism and official pilgrimages to the Yasukuni shrine threaten delicate ties with former enemies and colonies. Of these, the most contentious are those with North Korea and China, outlined in the 1997 Defence White Paper as Japan's main security threats.[44]

While large-scale militarisation seems highly unlikely given Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, it is not impossible. Withdrawal of the U. S. security umbrella, a cornerstone of the Yoshida doctrine which continues to influence Japanese foreign policy,[45]would likely result in some military build-up. This would be further exacerbated by a need to protect Japanese interests and maintain regional influence against an increasingly assertive China which has been rapidly reducing the disparity in economic power with Japan. However, this would likely evoke reactionary armament policies from surrounding nations, effectively creating a regional arms race.

In light of this, establishing reliable Mutual Assured Destruction to render war obsolete may be considered. However, this would escalate tensions exponentially due to close proximity and overlapping spheres of interests. Simmering nationalistic sentiment on all sides would result in hardline leaders taking helm, straining relations and impelling armed conflict. On the other hand, leaders must practice diplomacy with prudence and be wary of appearing too pacifist lest they empower radical voices.

To conclude, it is imperative that Japan and the U. S. work together to ensure that the civilian authority is not undermined and conditions favourable for militarism to gain popularity do not arise to prevent any future Japanese armed aggression.