

# Kamikaze



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During the era of the weak emperor Taisho (1912-26), the political power shifted from the oligarchic clique (genro) to the parliament and the democratic parties.

In the First World War, Japan joined the Allied powers, but played only a minor role in fighting German colonial forces in East Asia. At the following Paris Peace Conference of 1919, Japan's proposal of amending a "racial equality clause" to the covenant of the League of Nations was rejected by the United States, Britain and Australia. Arrogance and racial discrimination towards the Japanese had plagued Japanese-Western relations since the forced opening of the country in the 1800s, and were again a major factor for the deterioration of relations in the decades preceding World War 2. In 1924, for example, the US Congress passed the Exclusion Act that prohibited further immigration from Japan.

After WW1, Japan's economical situation worsened. The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the world wide depression of 1929 intensified the crisis.

During the 1930s, the military established almost complete control over the government. Many political enemies were assassinated, and communists persecuted. Indoctrination and censorship in education and media were further intensified. Navy and army officers soon occupied most of the important offices, including the one of the prime minister.

Already earlier, Japan followed the example of Western nations and forced China into unequal economical and political treaties. Furthermore, Japan's influence over Manchuria had been steadily growing since the end of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05. When the Chinese Nationalists began to seriously challenge Japan's position in Manchuria in 1931, the Kwantung

Army (Japanese armed forces in Manchuria) occupied Manchuria. In the following year, "Manchukuo" was declared an independent state, controlled by the Kwantung Army through a puppet government. In the same year, the Japanese air force bombarded Shanghai in order to protect Japanese residents from anti Japanese movements.

In 1933, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations since she was heavily criticized for her actions in China.

In July 1937, the second Sino-Japanese War broke out. A small incident was soon made into a full scale war by the Kwantung army which acted rather independently from a more moderate government. The Japanese forces succeeded in occupying almost the whole coast of China and committed severe war atrocities on the Chinese population, especially during the fall of the capital Nanking. However, the Chinese government never surrendered completely, and the war continued on a lower scale until 1945.

In 1940, Japan occupied French Indochina (Vietnam) upon agreement with the French Vichy government, and joined the Axis powers Germany and Italy. These actions intensified Japan's conflict with the United States and Great Britain which reacted with an oil boycott. The resulting oil shortage and failures to solve the conflict diplomatically made Japan decide to capture the oil rich Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and to start a war with the US and Great Britain.

In December 1941, Japan attacked the Allied powers at Pearl Harbour and several other points throughout the Pacific. Japan was able to expand her control over a large territory that expanded to the border of India in the West and New Guinea in the South within the following six months.

The turning point in the Pacific War was the battle of Midway in June 1942.

From then on, the Allied forces slowly won back the territories occupied by Japan. In 1944, intensive air raids started over Japan. In spring 1945, US forces invaded Okinawa in one of the war's bloodiest battles.

On July 27, 1945, the Allied powers requested Japan in the Potsdam Declaration to surrender unconditionally, or destruction would continue. However, the military did not consider surrendering under such terms, partially even after US military forces dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, and the Soviet Union entered the war against Japan on August 8.

On August 14, however, Emperor Showa finally decided to surrender unconditionally.

After World War II had ended, Japan was devastated. All the large cities (with the exception of Kyoto), the industries and the transportation networks were severely damaged. A severe shortage of food continued for several years.

The occupation of Japan by the Allied Powers started in August 1945 and ended in April 1952. General MacArthur was its first Supreme Commander. The whole operation was mainly carried out by the United States.

Japan basically lost all the territory acquired after 1894. In addition, the Kurile islands were occupied by the Soviet Union, and the Ryukyu Islands, including Okinawa, were controlled by the USA. Okinawa was returned to Japan in 1972, however a territorial dispute with Russia concerning the Kurile Islands has not been resolved yet.

The remains of Japan's war machine were destroyed, and war crime trials were held. Over 500 military officers committed suicide right after Japan surrendered, and many hundreds more were executed for committing war crimes. Emperor Showa was not declared a war criminal.

A new constitution went into effect in 1947: The emperor lost all political and military power, and was solely made the symbol of the state. Universal suffrage was introduced and human rights were guaranteed. Japan was also forbidden to ever lead a war again or to maintain an army. Furthermore, Shinto and the state were clearly separated.

MacArthur also intended to break up power concentrations by dissolving the zaibatsu and other large companies, and by decentralizing the education system and the police. In a land reform, concentrations in land ownership were removed.

Especially during the first half of the occupation, Japan's media was subject to a rigid censorship of any anti-American statements and controversial topics such as the race issue.

The co-operation between the Japanese and the Allied powers worked relatively smooth. Critics started to grow when the United States acted increasingly according to her self interests in the Cold War, reintroduced the persecution of communists, stationed more troops in Japan, and wanted Japan to establish an own self defence force despite the anti-war article in the constitution. Many aspects of the occupation's so called " reverse course" were welcomed by conservative Japanese politicians.

With the peace treaty that went into effect in 1952, the occupation ended. Japan's Self Defence Force was established in 1954, accompanied by large public demonstrations. Great public unrest was also caused by the renewal of the US-Japan Security Treaty of 1960.

After the Korean War, and accelerated by it, the recovery of Japan's economy flourished. The economic growth resulted in a quick rise of the living standards, changes in society and the stabilization of the ruling position of

the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), but also in severe pollution.

Japan's relations to the Soviet Union were normalized in 1956, the ones to China in 1972.

The 1973 oil crisis shocked the Japanese economy which was heavily depended on oil. The reaction was a shift to high technology industries.

In the 13th century, as legend goes, a Mongol emperor massed a large fleet for the invasion of Japan. The Japanese nation had little to defend itself with, and a Mongol conquest seemed certain. As the fleet massed outside Tokyo Bay gathered to

attack, a typhoon came up and either sank all the ships or blew them back to China. This storm, which the Japanese believed was sent by the gods to save their nation, was called "Divine Wind." In Japanese, the name is "Kamikaze."

By 1945 it was apparent that Japan was losing the War in the Pacific. As a last ditch effort to turn around their flagging fortunes, the Japanese revived the name Kamikaze and applied it to the suicide missions of their air force. Japanese Vice Admiral Takashiro Ohnishi had noted that the most effective way to inflict damage to warships of the allies was to crash planes into them. He pointed out that one accidental crash could do more damage than ten planes firing machine guns. It was decided that pilots would henceforth purposely crash their planes, which were to be loaded with half a ton of explosives, into enemy warships.

The idea of suicide as a part of national military policy was completely new in the history of warfare. The surprise attacks were to take the Americans completely by surprise. They were bewildered by the Japanese suicide missions, completely unable to comprehend the mentality behind them.

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The fact they were to go on suicide missions was accepted without question by the Japanese pilots. All newly conscripted into the Japanese Armed Forces were indoctrinated with the following five point oath:

- (1) A soldier must make loyalty his obligation
- (2) A soldier must make propriety his way of life
- (3) A soldier must highly esteem military valor
- (4) A soldier must have a high regard for righteousness
- (5) A soldier must live a simple life

Especially emphasized among the Japanese Soldier code was unyielding allegiance to Emperor and country. The belief in the Kamikaze was stronger than ever. It was adamantly believed that, because they were fighting for their Emperor God, the Kamikaze would bring them deliverance at the darkest hour, just as it had in the 13th Century. In fact, the call for kamikaze pilots drew a staggering response. Three times as many applied for suicide flights as the number of planes available. Experienced pilots were turned down. They were needed to train the younger men in how to fly to their deaths. As a result, the majority of those accepted were in their late teens. They felt grateful to have the opportunity to prove that they were real men. The Kamikaze missions were a success in that they ended up sinking 40 American ships in the Pacific. In the Philippines another 16 enemy ships were destroyed. The cost to the Japanese was hundreds of lives, eagerly given up. But it was not enough. Unlike the divine wind that decimated the Mongols in the 13th Century, the kamikaze were unable to halt the march of the allies. The surrender of their Emperor, broadcast to the nation via the radio was deeply shocking to the Japanese people. They had seen the Emperor as an infallible God and to hear him utter the word surrender was beyond

comprehension. Their confidence was completely shattered. The divine wind never blew.

With the passing of time, however, some of those who survived the Kamikaze raids have become critical of the policy. Saburo Sakai, a former Imperial Navy Ace, says: " Kamikaze is a surprise attack, according to our ancient war tactics. Surprise attacks will be successful the first time, maybe two or three times. But what fool would continue the same attacks for ten months? Emperor Hirohito must have realised it. He should have said Stop."

Another fighter pilot who narrowly escaped a kamikaze mission was Sadamu Komachi. He comments on the pointlessness of the kamikaze attacks. "

There was no strategy other than making suicidal attacks, carrying bombs. The commanding officer had no other strategy. It was a dying struggle. The Japanese chiefs of staff were struggling very hard. The strategy was must is master."

So, the sacrifices of the kamikaze pilots were, ultimately, in vain. Yet, the incredible Japanese devotion to a cause, which was so evident through their actions, would see their nation rise from the ashes of defeat to become a major player in the post war world.