

Japanese Modernization Lecture Series

Chapter 9. Modern Japan and the Wars Part 1

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Today, I would like to speak about Japan and the wars in modern times.

In this lecture series, we have discussed mostly the successes in modern Japan. However, Japan made many mistakes as well.

The worst of them were the wars, particularly the war that started with the Manchurian Incident in 1931, which expanded to the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and further to the Pacific War in 1941.

The Pacific War lasted until 1945 when Japan surrendered to the Allied Forces.

As a scholar in diplomatic and political history of Japan, whenever I read documents and books on this war, I feel very gloomy and bad indeed, I cannot but feel sorry for the peoples in Asia-Pacific who suffered from the war with Japan.

That said, what's most important to us today is to prevent any war from happening in the future.

In this context of war prevention, it is essential to know why the wars in the past, not only the war from 1931 to 1945 but also other major wars in modern Japan broke out.

From such a perspective, I will discuss why those wars happened in modern Japan.

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Section 1: The Warring States period and the Edo period

Let me touch upon the periods that preceded Meiji Revolution that started in 1868.

From mid-15th century to the end of the 16th century, there was the Warring States period.

As the name suggests, after the collapse of the central government, many feudal lords frequently fought each other in this period.

In the 1540s, guns were brought to Japan for the first time.

Within several decades, Japan became to possess more guns than any other country in the world due to the intensified rivalry among the feudal lords.

Japan was probably the biggest military power in the world.

Japan invaded into Korea twice in the 1590s, too, in this context.

However, soon after TOKUGAWA Iyeyasu established the new government in Yedo in 1603, peace began to prevail.

Actually, no major wars happened in Japan for two-and-half centuries.

I do not know any other country that enjoyed peace that long.

On the other hand, the development of military technology stopped there.

The weapons were mostly the same from the 1610s to the 1860s.

That was why Japan could not cope with the Western countries demanding the opening of Japan in the 1850s.

There were conflicts between Satsuma, the powerful feudal lord in the south west, with the Britain in 1863; and Choshu, another powerful feudal lord, with Western countries in 1863 and 1864.

They were crushed by the West; and they started a full effort immediately to modernize their military not only by purchasing new guns but also reorganizing their military system because they could not use new military technology in the traditional system that was based on class system.

That was why Satsuma and Choshu overwhelmed the Tokugawa shogunate that was bound by old class system; and could establish a new government under the Emperor in 1868.

Section 2: Traditional International System in Asia and Modern International System

In January 1868, the Meiji government was established under the Emperor, and started to establish a full-fledged modern nation-state.

One of the first major issues was how to adjust to the modern international system, in which sovereign states were equal to each other with absolute control over their own territories while colonies were in a subordinate status.

There were two problems that Japan had to solve in this regard, Ryukyu and Korea.

First, Ryukyu, now Okinawa Prefecture, had been an independent kingdom in the Middle Ages, but was controlled by the Satsuma domain since 1609.

However, Ryukyu was a tributary country to China under the Qing dynasty at the same time.

The “tributary” system was a political and economic relationship.

When a country expresses its loyalty to the Chinese emperor and sends local valuable goods to him, the Chinese emperor will provide protection to that country and send back much greater rewards to that country.

The Satsuma domain, fully knowing the benefit of the tributary system, kept purposely making Ryukyu behave as an independent country from Japan, while taking part in the tributary system.

As such, Japan chose to leave the matter of Ryukyu’s “territorial attribution” ambiguous.

However, in 1871, Japan found it impossible to leave this matter ambiguous when about 50 fishermen from Ryukyu were murdered in southern Taiwan where they were washed ashore.

Doing nothing diplomatically would be tantamount to admitting that Ryukyu was not part of Japan.

Therefore, Japan lodged a strong protest to the Qing dynasty, demanding stern punishment of those responsible for the murder.

Qing rejected Japan's demand, saying that Ryukyu "is not part of Japan," therefore, the murder "has nothing to do with Japan."

Qing's response was unacceptable to Japan.

In 1874, the Japanese government dispatched expeditionary troops to Taiwan and completed the punitive mission against those local Taiwanese who killed the Ryukyu fishermen.

At the same time, OKUBO Toshimichi, who was Japan's de facto prime minister at the time, visited Beijing and held strenuous negotiations with Qing.

Finally, the Qing side acknowledged that it was right for Japan to deploy troops to Taiwan and agreed to pay condolence money to the victims' families.

It meant that China effectively accepted that Ryukyu was part of Japan.

As such, the dispatch of expeditionary troops to Taiwan should be interpreted as a mission to settle the territorial issue over Ryukyu rather than Japan's territorial ambitions over Taiwan.

The other issue was Korea.

During the Edo period, Korea sent official missions to Japan 13 times altogether mostly to celebrate the inauguration of a new head of *the* Tokugawa shogunate.

But the Tokugawa shogunate was replaced by the Meiji government in 1868.

When the new government requested that diplomatic relations be established between Japan and Korea, Korea rejected the Japanese request, saying that Korea would not recognize any emperor other than the Qing emperor.

Therefore, Korea would not even receive a letter from the Japanese emperor.

The Japanese government repeated this request many times in vain. Eventually, Japan resorted to “gunboat diplomacy.” Japan sent a naval vessel to waters around Ganghwa Island to provoke a minor clash with Korea and force the Koreans to enter negotiations to open the country.

As a result, the Japan-Korea Treaty of Amity was concluded in 1876.

Its first clause stipulated that Korea was an independent country with the same right as Japan.

But even after opening itself to Japan, Korea was still slow in developing ties with Japan.

Japan expected to establish a legation in Korea, but Korea thought that it should be good enough to send an envoy to Japan about once in every 10 years.

This shows how reluctant they were to open the country.

Section 3: Japan-Qing War

The first major war outside of Japan was the Japan-Qing War from 1894 to 1895.

The background was the competition between Qing and Japan over Korea. Despite of the treaty of 1876, Qing’s traditional influence was still strong. Moreover, Qing began to strengthen its influence after the 1876 treaty.

Against the presence of a dominant pro-Qing group, there was a rise of a group that advocated to modernize Korea and make it independent from Qing with the cooperation from Japan.

Internal confrontation had been fierce in Korea traditionally.

Therefore, rival groups often sought to ally with foreign forces to overwhelm their opponents within the country.

Such a tendency goes back even to the ancient times.

In the 1880s, antagonism between the pro-Qing and pro-Japanese factions intensified to

the extent that they staged coup *d'états* to strengthen their positions.

In 1882, an anti-Japanese mutiny took place, and in 1884, an anti-Qing coup *d'états* took place.

In those two incidents, the pro-Japanese faction suffered setbacks because Qing could send more soldiers more quickly to Korea.

The Japan-Qing War broke out in 1894 as an extension of those fierce political infighting in Korea.

The war itself turned out to be a relatively short war with the victory of Japan.

Today, some scholars call this Japan-Qing War as “the First Sino-Japanese War” and the war between Japan and China fought from 1937 as “the Second Sino-Japanese War.” This is misleading, however.

In those years, China was ruled by the Qing dynasty that was run by Manchu people, an ethnic minority, with their tradition and customs forced on all other ethnic groups in China.

Han Chinese, the dominant ethnic majority in China, regarded the Qing dynasty as a regime ruled by foreigners.

As such, Japan did not go to war with the whole of China - Japan fought with the Manchu-ruled dynasty and its vassals.

To be specific, Japan fought with Li Hung-chang, the most prominent figure in Qing and his troops, the North Ocean Army.

Then, the victory was not over China as a whole.

Nonetheless, Japan's triumph astonished the world.

However, Japan was still much weaker than major Western powers.

After the war ended, Qing ceded the Liaodong Peninsula to Japan.

But Russia, France, and Germany intervened to this concession, and demanded that Japan return the Liaodong Peninsula, arguing that allowing a foreign country to hold a lease of an important place that was close to Beijing would be dangerous to the security of China.

As Japan was not yet in a position to say “no” to this Tripartite Intervention, it reluctantly abided by their demand.

As I said, Japan was at war with Qing but that it did not fight with Chinese people.

Indeed, the postwar public sentiment in Qing did not turn against Japan.

On the contrary, many students in China chose to come to Japan for their education, especially learning from Japan’s modernization.

Living cost and travel cost were much lower in Japan than living in and going to Western countries.

Also, many Western books had already been translated into Japanese, and the Japanese books were relatively easy for the Chinese because many Chinese characters were used in Japanese books.

On the other hand, there emerged a tendency among Japanese people to look down upon and make light of Chinese people.

Up until the Japan-Qing War, Japanese people had paid respect to China and were afraid of China as a great nation.

However, after the victory over Qing, Japanese people began harboring a sense of contempt for China.

I think this was a terribly regrettable development.

The Japan-Qing War also led to the worldwide revelation of how weak Qing was, inviting great powers to present their demands to China.

Germany demanded a lease of Jiaozhou Bay in the Shandong Peninsula for 99 years and got it in 1898.

Germany established a city of Qingdao and expanded its influence on the Shandong Peninsula through by constructing railways.

The Russian case was even worse.

In 1890, Russia embarked on the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. It was a really challenging project.

Russia initially planned to lay a railway link along the northern side of the border with China.

However, because the weather was freezing cold there and the construction would be very difficult, Russia decided to construct it across Chinese soil - via Manchuria- to reach the Russian Far Eastern stronghold of Vladivostok.

China was forced to yield to Russia's demand.

Russia thus gained the right to construct what was called Chinese Eastern Railway.

Then Russia became interested in laying a new railway line that would run from Harbin, a Manchurian station of Chinese Eastern Railway, to Dalian and Lushun in southern Manchuria.

Subsequently, Russia held a lease of Lushun and Dalian in 1898, the same year when Germany took control of Qingdao.

For Russia, it was strategically crucial because both ports are ice-free all year round. In comparison, Vladivostok was a freezing port.

Russia had been vigorously looking forward to having a warm-water or ice-free port. That is why Russia did everything to take control of those two ports.

Remember what Russia did in connection with Japan after the end of the Japan-Qing War.

Russia led the Tripartite Intervention, argued that allowing a foreign country to hold a lease of the Liaodong Peninsula would be dangerous to the security of China.

When Japan was forced to return the leased territory to Qing, Russia got it by themselves.

In addition to Germany and Russia, France and Britain expanded their respective interests in China, too.

Section 4: The Russo-Japanese War

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 took place for two reasons- geopolitical situations in the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria.

In Korea, as I mentioned earlier, there was an internal infighting between the pro-Qing group and the pro-Japanese group.

When Japan had to concede to the Tripartite Intervention, many Koreans understood that Japan was still weak.

There was a rise of a pro-Russian group in Korea.

In 1896, the Korean king and the crown prince, protected by the pro-Russian group, fled from their palace to seek refuge at the Russian Legation.

This was an awful event if you imagine that Japan's emperor and his crown prince have no place but the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo to reside.

The second factor that led to the Russo-Japanese War was an uprising by Chinese people, "the Boxer Rebellion."

It developed into a big anti-foreigner, anti-Christian campaign, and the Qing government finally chose to side with them.

As a result, the lives of foreign diplomats and nationals, including those from Japan, who lived mostly in Beijing, were put at stake.

To protect them, eight nations - Britain, the United States, France, Germany, Russia, Austria, Italy and Japan- hurriedly formed an alliance and jointly dispatched troops to Beijing.

The Boxer Rebellion then came to an end.

However, Russia did not withdraw about 100,000 troops it sent to southern Manchuria as part of the Eight-Nation Alliance campaign to quell the Chinese uprising.

“Russianizing” the region seemed to have started.

Japan felt extremely threatened by the presence of Russian troops in southern Manchuria. So did Britain because Britain was competing with Russia in Central Asia.

That was why Japan and Britain concluded the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902.

The Anglo-Japanese alliance looked effective at the beginning.

Russia promised to withdraw the troops from Manchuria and Korea but did not keep the promise eventually.

Now, Japan found itself in a very difficult position.

Japan began negotiations with Russia over mutual recognition of each other’s regional interests.

According to the Japanese proposal, Japan would make no complaint over whatever Russia would do in Manchuria, while Russia would say nothing about Japan’s activity in Korea.

However, the negotiations failed eventually.

In February 1904, Japan started the war by attacking the Russian naval base in Lushun.

Almost no one in the world expected Japan to defeat Russia.

Japan had started its full-scale modernization only 36 years ago, while Russia was one of the world’s biggest military powers.

Japan made desperate efforts and suffered heavy casualties with 88,000 troops killed and 153,000 wounded.

Japan kept fighting with Russian troops in various places in Manchuria.

Japan won the Siege of Lushun, in December 1904 after five months of fierce fighting. It was necessary for Japan to destroy the Russian fleet at the Lushun naval base before the Russian Baltic Fleet's arrival in the Far East to join Russia's Far Eastern Fleet.

In March 1905, Japan won the Battle of Mukden, but could not make a decisive victory over Russia.

And it was the limit of Japan's power on the land.

In May 1905, the Baltic Fleet finally arrived in the Sea of Japan after a long voyage.

The result was Japan's total victory.

All the Russian vessels were sunk or disabled, while no Japanese vessel was sunk.

Japan's astounding victory was a rare achievement in world naval history.

It was at this moment that the United States offered a mediation.

If the war continues, U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt thought, Japan might lose the war. On the other hand, Russia remained concerned about a possible revolution within the country and, therefore, agreed to the U.S. offer.

In August 1905, Japan- Russia started negotiations on a peace treaty at the Portsmouth naval shipyard in Maine, the United States, and the peace treaty was concluded there.

Although the Japanese military fought quite well, there was a very important factor in favor of Japan- the support of Britain and the United States.

Britain kept Japan updated on every movement of Russia.

When Russia sent the Baltic Fleet, Britain refused to allow the Russian fleet to sail through the Suez Canal, which was controlled by Britain then.

Then Russian ships had to travel south of Africa.

Beyond the Cape of Good Hope, there were only two places where the Russian fleet could have ships repaired and loaded with food, water and fuels.

They were Madagascar, a French colony, and French Indochina, today's Vietnam.

Due to such navigation circumstances, Russian sailors became badly exhausted.

On the financial side, as Japan was still a poor country, it sought financial support from Britain and the United States.

In the United States, Wall Street, its financial center, took an anti-Russian stand, because Russia was notorious for oppressing the Jews.

At Wall Street, as Jews formed the most powerful group, pro-Japanese sentiment prevailed.

And Britain, as an ally, also extended their financial support to Japan.

In Japan, there was a wise and effective leadership.

Meiji oligarchs were not always united, but in this case of national emergency, they fully cooperated beyond sectional interests such as diplomacy, finance, army, and navy.

Top leaders of the army were not concerned about the “face,” and said frankly that Japan should make peace at any cost because the army could not keep fighting any more.

Compared to Taiwan and huge indemnity Japan got after the Japan-Qing War, the reward of the Russian -Japanese War was rather modest.

Japan gained what Russia had gained in southern Manchuria from Qing before the war, namely, the lease of the port cities of Lushun and Dalian and about two thirds of the southern branch line of Chinese Eastern Railway.

In order to operate the railway, South Manchuria Railway Company was established in 1906.

Also, Russia ceded the southern half of Sakhalin to Japan.

The Russo-Japanese War had a variety of impacts on other countries in the world.

For instance, the victory of Japan sparked the rise of nationalism in those countries that had been under control of Western countries.

In India, Jawaharlal Nehru, who later emerged as the independence movement leader in

India and became its first prime minister, was inspired by Japan's victory over Russia.

He said, "This was the victory of little Japan over giant Russia. If Japan could make good against one of the most powerful European countries, why not India?"

Also, in Indonesia, Egypt and many other countries that became independent between the 1940s and the 1960s, their independence movement leaders were strongly encouraged as they learned about Japan's victory over Russia.

On the other hand, there were negative legacies of the Russo-Japanese War.

First, Japan ended up being heavily indebted.

Japan had no choice but to be on good terms with Britain, the United States and France because it needed their help in raising funds abroad for debt redemption.

So, when Japan signed a series of pacts and agreements with the United States and Britain in 1905 and with France in 1907, these included a clause that Japan would refrain from contacting the independence movements in the Philippines, India, and Indochina respectively.

Before closing this section on the Russo-Japanese War, I think I must comment briefly on how Japanese society remembered Japan's victory over Russia.

There is no doubt that Japan fought well and prevailed.

But it also owed a lot to the support of Britain and the United States, to Britain's intelligence and the U.S. financial power.

However, there emerged a public self-assertion that Japan won the war on its own thanks to its mental strength.

Japanese people became obsessed with an idea that Japan must absolutely not give up its war achievements in Manchuria, including Lushun and Dalian as well as South Manchuria Railway, because all of them were gained after suffering heavy casualties.

I think this was a big negative legacy of the war.

Section 5: World War I and the 1920s

Nine years after the Russo-Japanese War ended, World War I broke out in 1914.

Japan entered the war by declaring war against Germany out of geopolitical ambition. Japan sent its troops to two theaters in the Asia-Pacific region.

One of them was Qingdao in Shandong Peninsula where Germany had a military base.

The other theater was the Pacific Ocean.

Japan seized German possessions there and brought them under its control.

When the League of Nations was established after the end of World War I, the newly formed world body gave Japan a mandate to govern those Pacific islands.

World War I was an all-out war in which the world's most advanced countries in Europe fought to the full extent of their abilities.

World War I led to the collapse of such great empires as Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Victorious countries like Britain and France were exhausted.

Then, the United States, an already powerful country that had been neutral for a while and declared war on Germany in 1917, rose as the world's mightiest country after the war.

Around that time, one keyword 'democracy' began drawing wider attention.

Now, the United States decided to come forward as a standard-bearer of democracy for the world.

In early 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson initiated a set of principles for peace, called "the Fourteen Points," to be used for peace negotiations in order to end World War I.

The peace program included the concept of "self-determination of the people."

Wilson introduced the concept with European countries in mind.

Europe had various peoples, such as Czechs, Hungarians and so forth- the Balkan Peninsula also had a variety of peoples.

The Wilson proposal envisaged granting the right to national self-determination to those peoples.

However, the U.S. proposal had an impact on the rest of the world.

The March First movement, the first independent movement in Korea, took place in 1919, and in China, May Fourth Movement broke out on May 4, 1919.

Such a symbolic concept like “self-determination of the people” would spread on its own like wildfire.

There is another important point we should not miss about World War I.

The war accelerated the advancement of military technology because all the advanced countries participated in the war by fully mobilizing their technological resources.

The war prompted the practical use of aircraft as well as submarines, while tanks made their debut in warfare in World War I.

Unlike European powers, Japan had no firsthand experience about those advanced armaments.

Let me take airplanes and submarines, for example.

In Japan, houses were mostly made of wood and paper.

Such structures are very vulnerable to fire.

So, cities and towns in Japan would be very vulnerable to air raids.

Submarines were becoming very important.

Given that Japan had to import natural resources and raw materials from abroad, it needed to pay utmost attention to the issue of maritime transportation.

In fact, Britain suffered from Germany’s submarine campaign during World War I.

Nonetheless, Japan failed to learn from the bitter experience of Britain.

As a result, Japan lagged behind Western powers in terms of advancing military technology.

At all events, after World War I was over, peace prevailed in the world for a while.

Many people were tired and sick of war and seriously wanted to keep the world free of war. Subsequently, the League of Nations was established, though the United States did not join it.

Japan, for its part, became a permanent member of the Executive Council, the equivalent of the Security Council of the United Nations today, contributing to the promotion of international cooperation.

In those days, there was a rise of liberal opinion leaders in Japan.

For example, ISHIBASHI Tanzan, who became a post-World-War-II prime minister, kept criticizing Japan's colonial policy.

He said Japan did not need to take control of Manchuria, Taiwan and Korea and advocated the independence of those countries from Japan, instead.

His ideas did not receive widespread attention in Japan. Still, it was important that Japanese society at the time had an aptitude to tolerate such critical opinions.

However, the stability in the 1920s did not last long.

In China, Chinese Nationalist Party, backed by the Soviet Union, launched the so-called Northern Expedition with the hope of reunifying China.

Beyond any expectations, the Northern Expedition succeeded in 1928.

The Chinese Nationalist Party argued that China remained poor because foreign countries had acquired a variety of concessions in China.

Their target was first Britain that had many important interests in the south, but as they kept advancing to the north, they became increasingly critical of Japan.

In the end, the Chinese Nationalist Party began to demand that Japan return South Manchuria Railway as well as Lushun and Dalian, the key parts of an area known as Kwantung.

Except for a few people such as ISHIBASHI Tanzan who thought Japan did not have to control Manchuria, most Japanese people thought those areas were of critical importance to Japan, and the Chinese Nationalist Party's demand offended them.

At about the same time, the Soviet Union was reviving as a military power again.

In 1929, the Soviet Union showed their military power to crush the Chinese troops in a conflict over Chinese Eastern Railway in northern Manchuria.

In other words, the Japanese army found that their opponent was reviving when the power basis of Japan was threatened by China.

Young officers in the army came to think that Japan had to consolidate its position in Manchuria.

The Great Depression took place in the United States in the same year, 1929.

It hit Japan's economy, too.

When the United States adopted a policy to increase its tariffs on imports to protect the U.S. industry, it hit Japan harder because the Japanese economy had relied on the export to the United States.

Japan's raw silk and silk thread particularly suffered an extreme blow among other goods.

Japan's rural areas were damaged terribly; and many impoverished farmers had to sell not only their land but also their daughters into kinds of labor they never desired.

The Japanese military became more and more alarmed about the situation.

Many of the soldiers were recruited from poor families; therefore they were quite sensitive to the worsening situations in rural areas.

As a result, many of Japanese military officers became inclined to believe that staying together with the United States would not be helpful for Japan.

Therefore, the Great Depression was the third main factor after the spread of nationalism in China and the rise of the Soviet Union to have an immense effect on the future of Japan at the time.

I would like to add that the United States was sympathetic to the rise of nationalism in China, too.

With the Great Depression, the United States image as a model country was hurt very much.

In the 1920s, the U.S. image was generally good.

However, some Japanese were already skeptical of the United States when President Woodrow Wilson rejected the Japan's proposal to include a principle of racial equality in the Covenant of the League of Nations in 1919.

In 1924, the U.S. Congress adopted a new immigration law accepting no Japanese, many Japanese were shocked by this racial prejudice.

Then came the shock of the Great Depression.

Many Japanese came to think the era of liberal democracy was over.

At that time, the influence of Marxism was very strong in Japan among the intellectuals particularly.

Moreover, there was a rise of totalitarianism in various countries.

Benito Mussolini and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had established their power in Italy and Turkey respectively.

Adolf Hitler's Nazi party became the No. 2 party in 1930 in Germany.

The Soviet Russia looked advancing under Joseph Stalin.

Then, some members of the Japanese army began advocating that Japan should break with the foreign policy of cooperation with Britain and the United States and that it should keep Manchuria under its rule.

In 1928, a Kwantung army officer KOMOTO Daisaku plotted the murder of Chang Tso-lin, the warlord who controlled Manchuria then, by blowing up his train.

The officer succeeded to kill Chang Tso-lin but it did not escalate into a bigger conflict as he wanted.

Now, I stop here this time.

In my next lecture, I'll start from Manchurian Incident.