

Japanese Modernization Lecture Series

Chapter 9. Modern Japan and the Wars Part 2

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Section 6: Manchurian Incident

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.

In September 1931, some part of the South Manchuria Railway was exploded by the officers in the Kwantung Army.

They argued that this was an attack by the Chinese on Japan's major interest and started a military operation to remove those Chinese troops.

The Chinese military were not strong, Western powers were still suffering from the economic difficulty since the Great Depression, and the Soviet Russia was cautious about the conflict with Japan.

As a result, the Kwantung Army conquered most of Manchuria in about half a year.

I am very critical of the Manchurian Incident as I will explain later.

But in those days, the incident appeared to be a great success as Japan gained a territory five times the size of the Japanese mainland — with a small number of casualties.

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Text citation: (Kitaoka 2020)

Reference: Kitaoka, Shinichi. 2020. "Chapter 9. Modern Japan and the Wars Part 2" Japanese Modernization Lecture Series. JICA-Open University of Japan. Makuhari, Chiba: BS231, Nov.

Up until that time, the sphere of Japanese influence was limited to the southern half of Manchuria while the northern half had been under the influence of Russia and the Soviet Union.

But Japanese military advanced to the north and brought the northern half, too, under its control.

The Manchurian Incident was followed quickly by the establishment of a state, named Manchukuo, in 1932.

This was a puppet state controlled by the Japanese.

The Kwantung Army chose Puyi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, to be the leader and later the emperor of Manchukuo.

The real power was in the hands of Kwantung Army officers.

However, the Cabinet of Prime Minister INUKAI Tsuyoshi declined to recognize the state of Manchukuo, which was proclaimed on March 1, 1932.

On May 15, he was assassinated by a group of military officers, which is known as the May 15 Incident.

The Japanese government finally recognized Manchukuo in the autumn of 1932.

When the League of Nations blamed Japan's invasion, Japan seceded from the world body in March 1933.

The League of Nation did not confer any obligation on Japan to quit it, but in the excitement of the success of the Manchurian Incident, Japan rejected any compromise and conducted such a rigid diplomacy and withdrew from the League of Nations.

Before the incident, Prime Minister HAMAGUCHI Osachi, leader of the Minsei Party, concluded a treaty of naval limitation in 1930 and was criticized very much by some navy admirals.

The same year, he could not handle economic policy very well in the Great Depression. Because of these reasons, he was shot by a right-wing man in 1930 and died next year.

His successor WAKATSUKI Reijiro was unable to control the army in the Manchurian Incident, which was a kind of coup d'état on the foreign soil.

As I mentioned earlier, the next prime minister INUKAI Tsuyoshi was assassinated.

The Manchurian Incident destroyed the civilian control in Japan.

Another important factor was the media.

In a quality magazine, former Tokyo University Professor YOSHINO Sakuzo criticized the Manchurian Incident as an invasion, diplomatic commentator KIYOSAWA Kiyoshi bitterly criticized Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations.

However, major newspapers, which had been supportive of the party cabinet system and the cooperation with the United States and Britain, now became very belligerent.

Section 7: The Sino-Japanese War

In May 1933, the Tanggu Truce was concluded between Japan and China.

After this truce there was no major war until 1937.

However, Japan's military wanted to expand its influence beyond the southern border of Manchukuo.

They pressed local people to set up two autonomous governments in 1935 as the buffer zones between the Manchukuo and Nanjing, then the capital of China.

The Chinese side strongly reacted to the Japanese move.

Tensions between Japan and China culminated with the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7, 1937.

The clash itself was thought to have accidentally occurred.

But China ordered its troops to advance to the north, while Japan decided to deploy reinforcements in preparation for any kind of emergency.

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident eventually led to a full-scale war between Japan and China with battles spreading to Shanghai in central China.

Chinese troops in the Shanghai area were strong enough to force Japanese troops into a hard battle.

Yet, Shanghai finally fell and Japanese troops moved on to the Chinese capital Nanjing, northwest of Shanghai.

Many Japanese expected the war with China to come to an end once the Japanese conquered the Chinese capital.

Therefore, Japanese troops rushed to Nanjing without well-thought planning.

In December 1937, Nanjing fell to Japanese troops.

During the Japanese assault, the notorious Nanjing Incident or “Nanjing Massacre” took place.

China says 300,000 Chinese were massacred.

Well-versed historians point out that the death toll could have stood at about 30,000.

One thing is clear that even if the number of victims put at 30,000, it was a massive massacre.

When the war was expanding around Shanghai, the casualty began to increase far beyond Japan’s military leadership had expected.

They came to be afraid of anger of the people directed to the military.

That was why strict censorship was introduced.

Those liberal critics like ISHIBASHI Tanzan and KIYOSAWA Kiyoshi could not write critical essays in major magazines and newspapers anymore.

Before the campaign in Nanjing, there were efforts of mediation by Germany.

Germany was close to both China and Japan.

Germany did not want Japan to be dragged into the war with China too much; they wanted Japan to threaten the Soviet Union from the east.

The Army General Staff wanted to accept this German mediation and stop the war with China to prepare for the coming war with the Soviet Union.

But the War Ministry opposed the mediation because they thought China would collapse soon.

It was a matter of great regret that civilian leaders, Prime Minister KONOE Fumimaro or Foreign Minister HIROTA Koki, did not intervene to support the mediation.

The Chinese Nationalist Party government did not surrender.

They abandoned its capital, Nanjing, and fled to Hankou, and retreated further west toward Chongqing in Sichuan Province in late 1938.

Japan's land troops gave up going to Chongqing.

In 1938 or 1939, it became increasingly clear that it would be difficult to bring wars to an end by military measures.

Japan, for its part, devised a solution, which was similar to what it did in Manchuria earlier.

Japan invited Wang Jingwei, number 2 of the Chinese Nationalist Party after Chiang Kai-shek, to form a pro-Japanese puppet regime.

Japan recognized the Wang Jingwei administration as the government of China to develop peaceful relations with it.

With the establishment of the puppet regime, Japan tried to establish a "New East Asian Order," involving Japan, Manchuria and China.

This was a proposal other countries would not accept at all.

Section 8: The Pacific War

In August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a Nonaggression Pact, and Germany began to invade Poland on September 1.

Britain, which had signed an agreement on mutual assistance with Warsaw just a while ago, declared war on Germany.

World War II started.

The Japanese army was put in a difficult situation, because they had been trying to unite with Germany to prepare a war with the Soviet Union.

But next year Germany started the war on the northern and western fronts.

The Netherlands surrendered in May and France in June.

It created a power vacuum in Southeast Asia.

Then there was a rise of the southward advancement theory.

In September 1940, the Japanese army sent troops to the northern French Indochina to cut the supply line via Hanoi to the Chinese Nationalist government in Chongqing.

French Indochina had rejected this move until the summer of 1940, but the new leadership of the pro-German Vichy government accepted Japan's move this time.

In the same month, Japan concluded a Tripartite Alliance with Germany and Italy.

The main figure was Foreign Minister MATSUOKA Yosuke.

He tried to expand it into a quadruple alliance adding the Soviet Russia to those three countries.

Matsuoka concluded a Neutrality Pact with the Soviet Union in April 1941.

With this, Matsuoka was thinking of competing with the United States.

However, his idea failed when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June.

The United States, which had been showing some flexibility to Japan, reverted to a tough position.

The United States did not have to worry about German-Soviet-Japan-Italy collaboration.

When Japan started to send troops to the southern French Indochina in June 1941, the United States responded with a very tough policy of embargoing oil and scrap iron exports to Japan.

In order to reach an agreement with the United States, Japan had to do big and clear compromises such as withdrawal from the southern French Indochina, and denial of the Tripartite alliance.

But the army was deadly opposed to any of those ideas.

In those years prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War, Japan had relied heavily on the United States for oil imports.

It was irrational and absurd to go to war with such a vital oil supplier to Japan.

Nonetheless, the Japanese leadership told itself as follows: "Once we are at war with the United States, we cannot get oil from the United States. We have to go to Dutch East-Indies, today's Indonesia, to get oil. In that case, the United States is very likely to emerge as our enemy. Therefore we should strike the United States first when they are not ready."

This was why Japan decided to attack Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Some people often say the United States had known the planned attack in advance, but let the Japanese navy assault Pearl Harbor, in order to enter into the war.

I do not agree with this theory, because, with the level of military technology available at that time, it was highly difficult to attack Pearl Harbor after sailing through the North Pacific in winter.

Almost no naval specialist could expect it.

From a short-term perspective, the attack on Pearl Harbor was an exceptional military achievement.

But, from a long-term perspective, I think, the naval attack was an act of folly with virtually no parallel in history.

With the attack, Japan made the Americans absolutely angry.

Most American did not want to get involved in any war then.

If Japan had begun a war with the Netherlands and Britain only, it would have been difficult for the United States to declare the war against Japan.

However, as Japan chose to strike the United States first, its action only led to a major war.

In the Pacific War, Japan was victorious in the first six months or for up to one year.

Once the war entered the stage of full-scale confrontation between Japanese and U.S. forces, Japan kept losing one battle after another.

As a result, Japan's personnel and cargo transportation capabilities were badly eroded.

Japan still deployed as many shiploads of troops, supplies and equipment as possible. Many of those vessels were sunk by U.S. forces on their ways with a certain number of human lives and food as well as arms lost each time.

Even when those soldiers managed to go ashore, many of them did not have weapons to fight with.

In the winter of 1944, the United States began bombing targets on Japanese soil after capturing the Pacific islands of Guam and Saipan.

It continued to carry out air raids exhaustively, striking more than 100 cities, including some that had no military bases.

On March 10, 1945, a massive U.S. bombing campaign killed as many as 100,000 people in Tokyo just in a single day by dropping numerous firebombs with fire encircling highly populated areas.

Consequently, 100,000 residents were trapped and burnt to death.

It was more than the total of deaths in the Russo-Japanese War: 88,000.

The Allies, led by the United States, issued the Potsdam Declaration on July 26, 1945, calling for the surrender of Japan under the terms defined in the statement.

As Japan did not accept it, the United States dropped an atomic bomb over Hiroshima on August 6 and another over Nagasaki on August 9.

They were two different types of nuclear bombs.

The United States wanted to know how effective each of them was as a weapon.

On August 9 of the same year, the Soviet Union renounced the Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact, and declared war on Japan, and Soviet troops began to invade Manchuria.

The Soviet Union later detained nearly 600,000 Japanese military and civilian personnel in Manchuria and other lands, keeping them interned in Soviet labor camps for several years after the war ended.

As a result, about 10 percent of them lost their lives while in detention.

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Soviet invasion shocked so much that Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945.

In retrospect, I must ask a question:

Did there ever exist any rational decision-making system in Japan during those years between the Manchurian Incident and the Pacific War?

Japan fought with China for four years without securing victory.

Nevertheless, Japan chose to go to war with the world's strongest power, which was also the major supplier of oil to Japan.

Though a culture of militarism was prevailing in Japan, there was no military rationality.

In short, there was no integrated military strategy between the army and the navy.

The army only prepared a war with the Soviet Union while the navy only thought of a war with the United States.

Moreover, there was no integrated strategy between the government and military pertaining to diplomacy, finance and military affairs.

It was because of the Meiji Constitution.

Under the Meiji Constitution, the emperor was almighty.

But emperor used to accept the advice of many government organizations such as the cabinet, the parliament, the army, and the navy.

Leaders of those government organizations used to cooperate to create a set of integrated policies so that the emperor could accept their advice.

This spirit of cooperation was badly lost after the Manchurian Incident and was not recovered until 1945.

Section 9: The Restoration of Peace

After its surrender, Japan came under occupation by the Allied forces.

Whereas Germany was under joint occupation by the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain and France, Japan was effectively under single-nation occupation by the United States.

It is worth mentioning that the United States has a particular trait as a nation — when you go to war with it, it turns out to be a really scary nation, but when you are on good terms with it, it becomes really friendly to you.

The United States took a generally soft approach to Japan but was determined to transform Japan into a peaceful nation that would never defy against the United States.

The United States wanted Japan to have a new constitution among many other reforms.

It was prepared by the Americans in February 1946 and modified slightly by the Japanese and was proclaimed later in that year.

The next step was punishing the war criminals.

In ending a war, usually three procedures are necessary — justice to war criminals, transferring territories, and paying war reparations.

In May 1946, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, or Tokyo Tribunal, was held, after the International Tribunals in Nuremberg started in October 1945.

Two concepts of war crimes were created after World War II in addition to conventional war crimes.

One was crime against peace: it is based on an idea that starting a war constitutes a war crime.

The other was crime against humanity: it was created to punish such terrible brutality as holocaust.

In Nuremberg both of the two new crimes were tried against Germany, but in Tokyo crime against humanity was not tried because there was no sufficient evidence.

Punishing crime against peace was not easy at all because it was expected to punish the acts that started war, and the period was for 14 years from 1931, the Manchurian Incident, to 1945.

It was a long and winding history.

ISHIWARA Kanji, who started the Manchurian Incident, later became critical of TOJO Hideki.

That was why he was not brought to the tribunal.

Some people call the Tokyo Tribunal as a judgment of civilization, other people call it as the victors' judgment or victors' revenge.

Both characters were mixed there.

It was not a simple revenge because there was certainly some goodwill working: there were people who believed that the acts of invasion had to be punished in order to prevent future wars.

On the other hand, we cannot call it a judgment of civilization because brutal activities on the part of the Allied forces such as the dropping of atomic bombs were not judged at all.

In connection with the issue of the Tokyo Trial, some people have taken issue with the fact that the emperor — known posthumously as Emperor Showa — was not tried in the tribunal.

First, the emperor himself was a good, gentle, and peace-loving man personally and was opposed to the war.

Secondly, he just behaved constitutionally to accept what the government and the military had prepared.

And most importantly, the goal of the United States was to transform Japan into a democratic and peace-loving nation.

For that purpose, the emperor's cooperation was essential.

If the Allied Powers had tried to punish him, there would have been a strong and massive resistance.

Thus, as a whole, the Tokyo Tribunal was a political and diplomatic act to end the war by punishing those responsible for the war and make Japan return to the international community.

When the Tokyo Tribunal was over in 1948, the Cold War was deepening in Asia.

In this context the United States changed its policy toward Japan from making it a safe country to the United States to developing it as a reliable partner of the United States against communism.

In 1951, the Peace Treaty with Japan was signed in San Francisco, and Japan regained its independence next year.

It was a soft peace rather than a hard peace.

A peace conference was held ahead of the signing of the Treaty of Peace with Japan that promised the end of the occupation and restoration of full sovereignty to Japan.

Japan was treated generally leniently by the United States during the occupation period and in the peace treaty talks.

The lenient treatment policy doubtlessly reflected the growing Cold War.

In the meantime, Japan's war reparations may be a good "yardstick" for measuring the nature of the attitude of each country toward postwar Japan at around that time.

For example, such advanced countries as the United States, Britain and the Netherlands and a few others renounced war reparations from Japan.

However, Japan had to enter into several years of negotiations with other countries — mostly low-income developing countries.

After several years of difficult negotiations, Japan agreed to pay handsome amounts of reparation money to Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Japan also had negotiations with Thailand, a neutral kingdom with which it did not fight during the war but had its troops stationed there.

As such, Japan paid “quasi-reparations” to compensate for wartime damage caused by Japanese troops.

After the reparations, Japan continued ODA or official development assistance with those Southeast Asian countries; Japanese companies have established operations in the region, creating a large number of jobs for people there.

Although there were some ripples in such relations even in the 1970s, according to many opinion polls, most of the peoples in Southeast Asia now regard Japan as the most reliable country in the world.

What we see in Southeast Asia can be definitely described as a successful example of long-lasting efforts to restore peace and overcome difficulties.

South Asian countries, including India, were basically sympathetic with Japan. They did not suffer much from the war with Japan.

Some South Asian leaders said Japan’s rise as a modern nation had encouraged them to revolt against colonial rule.

India did not participate in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference, but Pakistan and Ceylon, today’s Sri Lanka, took part in the San Francisco Peace Conference, making speeches in support of Japan.

I now turn to China, with which Japan fought the fiercest and longest battle.

First of all, Japan faced the issue of which governments in China it should establish diplomatic relations with.

In those days, the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party remained involved in a civil war.

Subsequently, the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949.

The United States said Taiwan, namely the Republic of China, should be invited to represent China in the San Francisco Peace Conference in 1951, but Britain insisted that Beijing should be invited.

In the end, neither of them was invited.

This means that the peace conference was held without the participation of China.

Following the San Francisco conference, the United States pressed Japan very strongly to establish diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Japan eventually complied with the U.S. request, though reluctantly, and established diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

At the time, Taiwan, the Republic of China, vehemently asserted that it was the legitimate government of China.

Japan accepted the Republic of China's assertion.

In return for recognizing it as the legitimate government of China, Taiwan renounced war reparations from Japan.

Twenty-one years later, in 1972, Japan normalized diplomatic relations with China by recognizing the People's Republic of China as the sole government of China.

On that occasion, China renounced its "demand" for war reparations from Japan.

At the time, the Chinese leadership explained the reason for waving war reparations as follows:

"The burden of war reparations would have to be eventually borne by the Japanese people at large and, while some militarists in Japan were responsible for the wars with China, the Japanese people at large were not responsible for the war."

The Chinese statement was meant to show that the Chinese Communist Party was more lenient to Japan than the Chinese Nationalist Party.

In response, in the late 1970s, Japan began providing China with huge amount of ODA year after year.

Actually Japan had a set of principles about ODA, explicit or implicit, such as no ODA to communist countries, no ODA to military powers, not to speak of countries that possess nuclear weapons.

Despite of all such constraints on the Japanese side, China continued to be the largest recipient of economic cooperation from Japan for many years.

Understandably, the Japanese people wanted at the bottom of the heart to convey their feeling of apology to the Chinese people.

What was extended from Japan was quite similar to war reparations, though there have existed no written documents confirming such an interpretation.

The last country I need to look at in connection with the issue of war reparations is South Korea.

South Korea wanted to participate in the San Francisco Peace Conference but was unable to do so because a peace conference serves as the venue for the warring countries to get together and seek to restore peace.

However, taking into consideration of the fact that South Korea is a close neighbor, Japan entered into bilateral negotiations and concluded the *“Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea”* in 1965, and decided to provide economic cooperation that exceeded well the annual budget of South Korea.

In those years, South Korea, still reeling from the Korean War, was one of the poorest countries in East Asia.

Leveraged by Japanese economic cooperation, South Korea then began rapidly developing economically, an achievement that became possible thanks to the Korean people’s hard work, of course.

Despite such cooperation extended by Japan and the miraculous economic development in Korea, today’s South Korean government is not satisfied with the 1965 treaty.

However, because of time limitation, I cannot talk on this issue today.

Concluding Remarks

In closing, I would like to make some remarks, reviewing what I have discussed in this lecture.

In 1945, the United Nations was established and began to work.

It is my belief that the most important agreement spelled out in the U.N. Charter is that member countries of the United Nations would not seek to settle their international disputes by force or by the threat of force.

In the world, a great variety of wars have occurred to date and they have been settled by the use of force.

What the Charter envisions is that international disputes should be settled either through diplomatic talks, or by mediation or by an international tribunal.

I think the adoption of the principle for refraining from using force to settle disputes is a monumental milestone for humankind.

In fact, after World War I, peace advocates in some countries began international efforts to stop seeking to settle international disputes by war.

In 1928, the United States and France signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact — which was named after their foreign ministers, with a view to renouncing the use of war as an instrument of national policy.

The idea of outlawing war was refined and incorporated into the U.N. Charter.

The idea of renouncing war is also incorporated in the first paragraph of Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan.

The Japanese version stipulates that Japan shall refrain from the “threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.”

In this connection, I want to clarify that this particular provision in the Constitution of Japan is the same as the UN Charter.

Such a provision is adopted by many countries in the world.

What makes Japan unique is the second paragraph of Article 9.

“In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.”

This is a provision that is almost unprecedented globally.

As it is strange for a sovereign country to have no military for self-defense, the government of Japan reinterpreted this clause so that Japan can possess minimum power to defend itself.

Thus the Self-Defense Forces were created, though its scope of activity was still quite limited than those of any other countries.

As I mentioned earlier, after World War I, there emerged international efforts, calling on the international community for cooperation to stop the use of military force to settle international disputes.

However, Japan became the first country to impair such efforts by — the Manchurian Incident.

Of course, Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union did far greater harm to the international peace-advocating move.

But, the fact did remain unchanged that Japan was the first country to founder the move.

The responsibility of Japan for destroying the international order, I think, was heavy.

Because of this, it is my belief that Japan must keep assuming a greater postwar role in ensuring and supporting the continuation of international cooperation.

I remain determined to contribute to the maintenance of an international system in which international cooperation is a norm, free trade can thrive, and international disputes can be peacefully settled.

Now, I refer to some key points I mentioned earlier.

First, there were so many cases in which Japan failed to find what was its real national interests.

As ISHIBASHI Tanzan pointed out, trade with the United States was more important than economic interests in Manchuria.

Preparing a war with Soviet Union on the ground and another war with the United States on the sea was definitely impossible within Japan's national power.

Attacking the United States, the major provider of oil when Japan needed oil badly was a suicidal act.

Rational calculation of national interests had to be the basis of any foreign policy.

Second, in order to implement rational policy, a strong leadership is necessary.

In the case of prewar Japan, the government and the military, army and navy, and many branches of the government and the military went their ways without being integrated.

In postwar Japan, each prime minister can wield strong power over them, though sectionalism has not been suppressed effectively yet.

Third, there was not enough imagination to the other people.

For example, Japan became highly enthusiastic about gaining interests in Manchuria, but those interests were also as important or more important to Chinese people.

There were people in Japan who wanted to liberate Asian people from imperialism of the Western powers, but they were minorities.

Many Japanese were arrogant over those people in Asia during the war time.

I remember that former Prime Minister NAKASONE Yasuhiro, who passed away in November 2019, said, "I am a nationalist. That's why I can understand nationalism of other people."

I think a genuine nationalism must be open and reciprocal like this.

Fourth, freedom of speech is deadly necessary.

Any government may make mistakes. To correct the mistakes, we need criticism.

As mentioned early in this lecture, Japan did have an era, albeit brief, in the 1920s, when there were a number of far-sighted thought leaders in Japan such as YOSHINO Sakuzo, ISHIBASHI Tanzan and KIYOSAWA Kiyoshi who served as the guardians of freedom of speech.

Nevertheless, in the 1930s when Japan became more and more agitated to go to war, the Japanese leadership suppressed freedom of speech to the extent that even ISHIBASHI and KIYOSAWA were deprived of the right to freedom of speech.

I think that first and foremost, freedom of speech is the most important bedrock of peace.