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## JAPAN AT WAR AND PEACE, 1930-1949: U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT RECORDS ON THE INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF JAPAN

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**Date Range:** 1930-1949

**Content:** 114,304 images

**Source Library:** U.S. National Archives

### **Detailed Description:**

Japan emerged from the 19th Century as the first Asian industrialized nation. Domestic commercial activities and foreign trade had met the demands for material culture in the Tokugawa period, but the modernized Meiji and later Showa eras had radically different requirements. The concept of a market economy was embraced and Japan adopted Western forms of free enterprise capitalism. The private sector—in a nation blessed with an abundance of aggressive entrepreneurs—welcomed such change. Economic reforms included a unified modern currency based on the yen, banking, commercial and tax laws, stock exchanges, and a communications network.

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In the late 1920s, industry outstripped agriculture, and in the 1930s industry, moderately affected by the Great Depression plaguing the rest of the industrialized world, continued to grow. Using the strong Japanese economy to support their imperialistic designs, ultranationalist military officers succeeded in stifling the democratic movement and took control of the government in the name of the emperor. With their power unchecked, the militarist government led the nation into a series of military conflicts that culminated in the almost total destruction of the nation during World War II.

World War II destroyed nearly half of Japan's industry. Japan's economy was completely disrupted, and the country was forced to rely on United States assistance and imports of essential food and raw material. Throughout the Occupation period, the country began the process of rebuilding its economy, industry, political base, and society.

There is essential and unique documentation on a wide variety of topics relating to Japanese internal affairs, including:

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Militarism

Sino-Japanese war and the home front

Intellectual trends

Trade and tariffs

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Raw materials acquisition

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Iron and steel industrial expansion

Rise of the Zaibatsu

Emigration

Disarmament

Political relations with Manchukuo

Gold embargo against Japan

Oil prospecting in Sakhalin

International Depression

Japanese military doctrine and Bushido

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Patents and trademarks

Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

Economic markets in China and Southeast Asia

Affects of nuclear bombing of Hiroshima

Establishment of Occupation Government

SCAP and shadow Japanese government

International loans and trade credits

### **Historical Description**

#### *"Taish Democracy" and Economic Development*

The two-party political system that had been developing in Japan since the turn of the century finally came of age after World War I. This period has sometimes been called that of "Taish Democracy," after the reign title of the emperor. In 1918 Hara Takashi, a protégé of Saionji and a major influence in the prewar Seiyokai cabinets, had become the first commoner to serve as prime minister. He took advantage of long-standing relationships he had throughout the government, won the support of the surviving genro and the House of Peers, and brought into his cabinet as army minister Tanaka Giichi, who had a greater appreciation of favorable civil-military relations than his predecessors. Nevertheless, major problems confronted Hara: inflation, the need to adjust the Japanese economy to postwar circumstances, the influx of foreign ideas, and an emerging labor movement. Prewar solutions were applied by the cabinet to these postwar problems, and little was done to reform the government. Hara worked to ensure a Seiyokai majority through time-tested methods, such as new election laws and electoral redistricting, and embarked on major government-funded public works programs.

The public grew disillusioned with the growing national debt and the new election laws, which retained the old minimum tax qualifications for voters. Calls were raised for universal suffrage and the dismantling of the old political party network. Students, university professors, and journalists, bolstered by labor unions and inspired by a variety of democratic, socialist, communist, anarchist, and other Western schools of thought, mounted large but orderly public demonstrations in favor of universal male suffrage in 1919 and 1920. New elections brought still another Seiyokai majority, but barely so. In the political milieu of the day, there was a proliferation of new parties, including socialist and communist parties.

In the midst of this political ferment, Hara was assassinated by a disenchanted railroad worker in 1921. Hara was followed by a succession of nonparty prime ministers and coalition cabinets. Fear of a broader electorate, left-wing power, and the growing social change engendered by the influx of Western popular culture together led to the passage of the Peace Preservation Law (1925), which forbade any change in the political structure or the abolition of private property.

Unstable coalitions and divisiveness in the Diet led the Kenseikai (Constitutional Government Association) and the Seiy Honto (True Seiyokai) to merge as the Rikken Minseito (Constitutional Democratic Party) in 1927. The Rikken Minseito platform was committed to the parliamentary system, democratic politics, and world peace. Thereafter, until 1932, the Seiyokai and the Rikken Minseito alternated in power.

Despite the political realignments and hope for more orderly government, domestic economic crises plagued whichever party held power. Fiscal austerity programs and appeals for public

support of such conservative government policies as the Peace Preservation Law—including reminders of the moral obligation to make sacrifices for the emperor and the state—were attempted as solutions. Although the world depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s had minimal effects on Japan—indeed, Japanese exports grew substantially during this period—there was a sense of rising discontent that was heightened with the assassination Prime Minister Hamaguchi Osachi in 1931.

### *Interwar Period and Militarism*

After World War I and the intellectual ferment of the period, nationalist societies became numerous but had a minority voice during the era of two-party democratic politics. Diverse and angry groups called for nationalization of all wealth above a fixed minimal amount and for armed overseas expansion. The emperor was highly revered by these groups, and when Hirohito was enthroned in 1927, initiating the Showa period (Bright Harmony, 1926-89), there were calls for a "Showa Restoration" and a revival of Shinto. Emperor-centered neo-Shintoism, or State Shinto, which had long been developing, came to fruition in the 1930s and 1940s. It glorified the emperor and traditional Japanese virtues to the exclusion of Western influences, which were perceived as greedy, individualistic, bourgeois, and assertive. The ideals of the Japanese family-state and self-sacrifice in service of the nation were given a missionary interpretation and were thought by their ultranationalist proponents to be applicable to the modern world.

The 1930s were a decade of fear in Japan, characterized by the resurgence of right-wing patriotism, the weakening of democratic forces, domestic terrorist violence (including an assassination attempt on the emperor in 1932), and stepped-up military aggression abroad. A prelude to this state of affairs was Tanaka Giichi's term as prime minister from 1927 to 1929. Twice he sent troops to China to obstruct Chiang Kai-shek's unification campaign. In June 1928, adventurist officers of the Guandong Army, the Imperial Japanese Army unit stationed in Manchuria, embarked on unauthorized initiatives to protect Japanese interests, including the assassination of a former ally, Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin. The perpetrators hoped the Chinese would be prompted to take military action, forcing the Guandong Army to retaliate. The Japanese high command and the Chinese, however, both refused to mobilize. The incident turned out to be a striking example of unchecked terrorism. Even though press censorship kept the Japanese public from knowing about these events, they led to the downfall of Tanaka and set the stage for a similar plot, the Manchurian Incident, in 1931.

A secret society founded by army officers seeking to establish a military dictatorship—the Sakurakai (Cherry Society, the cherry blossom being emblematic of self-sacrifice)—plotted to attack the Diet and political party headquarters, assassinate the prime minister, and declare martial law under a "Showa Restoration" government led by the army minister. Although the army canceled its coup plans (to have been carried out in March 1931), no reprisals were taken and terrorist activity was again tacitly condoned.

The Manchurian Incident of September 1931 did not fail, and it set the stage for the eventual military takeover of the Japanese government. Guandong Army conspirators blew up a few meters of South Manchurian Railway Company track near Mukden (now Shenyang), blamed

it on Chinese saboteurs, and used the event as an excuse to seize Mukden. One month later, in Tokyo, military figures plotted the October Incident, which was aimed at setting up a national socialist state. The plot failed, but again the news was suppressed and the military perpetrators were not punished. Japanese forces attacked Shanghai in January 1932 on the pretext of Chinese resistance in Manchuria. Finding stiff Chinese resistance in Shanghai, the Japanese waged a three-month undeclared war there before a truce was reached in March 1932. Several days later, Manchukuo was established. Manchukuo was a Japanese puppet state headed by the last Chinese emperor, Puyi, as chief executive and later emperor. The civilian government in Tokyo was powerless to prevent these military happenings. Instead of being condemned, the Guandong Army's actions enjoyed popular support back home. International reactions were extremely negative, however. Japan withdrew from the League of Nations, and the U.S. became increasingly hostile.

The Japanese system of party government finally met its demise with the May 15th Incident in 1932, when a group of junior naval officers and army cadets assassinated Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi. Although the assassins were put on trial and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment, they were seen popularly as having acted out of patriotism. Inukai's successors, military men chosen by Saionji, the last surviving genro, recognized Manchukuo and generally approved the army's actions in securing Manchuria as an industrial base, an area for Japanese emigration, and a staging ground for war with the Soviet Union. Various army factions contended for power amid increasing suppression of dissent and more assassinations. In the February 26th Incident of 1936, about 1,500 troops went on a rampage of assassination against the current and former prime ministers and other cabinet members, and even Saionji and members of the imperial court. The revolt was put down by other military units, and its leaders were executed after secret trials. Despite public dismay over these events and the discredit they brought to numerous military figures, Japan's civilian leadership capitulated to the army's demands in the hope of ending domestic violence. Increases were seen in defense budgets, naval construction (Japan announced it would no longer accede to the London Naval Treaty), and patriotic indoctrination as Japan moved toward a wartime footing.

In November 1936, the Anti-Comintern Pact, an agreement to exchange information and collaborate in preventing communist activities, was signed by Japan and Germany. War was launched against China after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 7, 1937, in which an allegedly unplanned clash took place near Peking between Chinese and Japanese troops and quickly escalated into full-scale warfare. The Second Sino-Japanese War ensued, and relations with the U.S., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union deteriorated. The increased military activities in China—and the Japanese idea of establishing "Mengukuo" in Inner Mongolia and the Mongolian People's Republic—soon led to a major clash over rival Mongolia-Manchukuo border claims. When Japanese troops invaded eastern Mongolia, a ground and air battle with a joint Soviet- Mongolian army took place between May and September 1939 at the Battle of Halhin Gol. The Japanese were severely defeated, sustaining as many as 80,000 casualties, and thereafter Japan concentrated its war efforts

on its southward drive in China and Southeast Asia, a strategy that helped propel Japan ever closer to war with the U.S. and Great Britain and their allies.

Under the prime ministership of Konoe Fumimaro the government was streamlined and given absolute power over the nation's assets. In 1940, the 2,600th anniversary of the founding of Japan, according to tradition, Konoe's cabinet called for the establishment of a "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere," a concept building on Konoe's 1938 call for a "New Order in Greater East Asia," encompassing Japan, Manchukuo, China, and Southeast Asia. The Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere was to integrate Asia politically and economically—under Japanese leadership—against Western domination and was developed in recognition of the changing geopolitical situation emerging in 1940. (In 1942 the Greater East Asia Ministry was established, and in 1943 the Greater East Asia Conference was held in Tokyo.) Also in 1940, political parties were ordered to dissolve, and the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, comprising members of all former parties, was established to transmit government orders throughout society. In September 1940, Japan joined the Axis alliance with Germany and Italy when it signed the Tripartite Pact, a military agreement to re-divide the world that was directed primarily against the U.S.

There had been a long-standing and deep-seated antagonism between Japan and the America since the first decade of the twentieth century. Each perceived the other as a military threat, and trade rivalry was carried on in earnest. The Japanese greatly resented the racial discrimination perpetuated by U.S. immigration laws, and the Americans became increasingly wary of Japan's interference in the self-determination of other peoples. Japan's military expansionism and quest for national self-sufficiency eventually led the U.S. in 1940 to embargo war supplies, abrogate a long-standing commercial treaty, and put greater restrictions on the export of critical commodities. These American tactics, rather than forcing Japan to a standstill, made Japan more desperate. After signing the Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact in April 1941, and while still actively making war plans against the U.S., Japan participated in diplomatic negotiations with Washington aimed at achieving a peaceful settlement. Washington was concerned about Japan's role in the Tripartite Pact and demanded the withdrawal of Japanese troops from China and Southeast Asia. Japan countered that it would not use force unless "a country not yet involved in the European war" (that is, the U.S.) attacked Germany or Italy. Further, Japan demanded that the U.S. and Great Britain not interfere with a Japanese settlement in China (a pro-Japanese puppet government had been set up in Nanjing in 1940). Because certain Japanese military leaders were working at cross-purposes with officials seeking a peaceful settlement (including Konoe, other civilians, and some military figures), talks were deadlocked. On October 15, 1941, army minister Tojo Hideki declared the negotiations ended. Konoe resigned and was replaced by Tojo. After the final U.S. rejection of Japan's terms of negotiation, on December 1, 1941, the Imperial Conference ratified the decision to embark on a war of "self-defense and self-preservation" and to attack the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor.

*World War II and the Postwar Period*

After initial naval and battlefield successes and a tremendous overextension of its resources in the war (known to Japan as the Greater East Asia War, to the U.S. as the Pacific War) against a quickly mobilizing U.S. and Allied war effort, Japan was unable to sustain "Greater East Asia". As early as 1943, Konoe led a peace movement, and Tojo was forced from office in July 1944. His successors sought peace mediation (Sweden and the Soviet Union were approached for help in such a process), but the enemy offered only unconditional surrender. After the detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 8, 1945, respectively, the emperor asked that the Japanese people bring peace to Japan by "enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable" by surrendering to the Allied powers. The documents of surrender were signed on board the U.S.S. Missouri in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945. The terms of surrender included the occupation of Japan by Allied military forces, assurances that Japan would never again go to war, restriction of Japanese sovereignty to the four main islands "and such minor islands as may be determined," and surrender of Japan's colonial holdings.

A period of demilitarization and democratization followed in Japan (1945-47). Under the direction of General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), Japan's army and navy ministries were abolished, munitions and military equipment were destroyed, and war industries were converted to civilian uses. War crimes trials found 4,200 Japanese officials guilty; 700 were executed, and 186,000 other public figures were purged. State Shinto was disestablished, and on January 1, 1946, Emperor Hirohito repudiated his divinity. MacArthur pushed the government to amend the 1889 Meiji Constitution, and on May 3, 1947, the new Japanese constitution (often called the "MacArthur Constitution") came into force. Constitutional reforms were accompanied by economic reforms, including agricultural land redistribution, reestablishment of trade unions, and severe proscriptions on zaibatsu.

The relatively rapid stabilization of Japan led to a relaxation of SCAP purges and press censorship. Quick economic recovery was encouraged, restrictions on former zaibatsu members eventually were lifted, and foreign trade was allowed. Finally, in September 1951 fifty-one nations met in San Francisco to reach a peace accord with Japan. China, India, and the Soviet Union participated in the conference but did not sign the treaty, formally known as the Treaty of Peace. Japan renounced its claims to Korea, Taiwan, Penghu, the Kuril Islands, southern Sakhalin, islands it had gained by League of Nations mandate, South China Sea islands, and Antarctic territory, while agreeing to settle disputes peacefully according to the United Nations Charter. Japan's rights to defend itself and to enter into collective security arrangements were acknowledged. The 1952 ratification of the Japan-U.S. Mutual Security Assistance Pact also ensured a strong defense for Japan and a large postwar role in Asia for the U.S.

*Source: Federal Research Division, Japan Country Study, Library of Congress: Country Studies/Area Handbook Program, 1994.*

**U.S. State Department Central Classified Files**

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