THE RISE OF THE MILITARISTS IN JAPAN

While Japan was giving the appearance of being a good neighbour in the western Pacific during the 1920s by involvement in treaties designed to preserve peace, extremist elements in Japan's government, military and civilian population had privately never renounced the use of force to expand Japan's territory. Towards the end of the 1920s a combination of economic, social, and political factors played into the hands of the militarists. Having been barely touched by World War I, Japanese industry and trade had expanded dramatically during that war to fill the gap left by Europe's devastated industries. However, most of the raw materials needed to supply Japanese manufacturing industry had to be imported because Japan possessed inadequate natural resources. This problem was compounded by substantial population increase. Between 1918 and 1930, Japan's population had expanded dramatically and outstripped the capacity of the nation's resources to support it. To sustain its population blow-out, substantial food imports were essential, but foreign tariffs imposed on its exports of manufactured goods limited the capacity of Japan to pay for its food imports. Japan had tried to deal with its population problem by encouraging emigration of Japanese to countries such as the United States, but had met resistance from Americans who feared the loss of unskilled jobs to cheap immigrant labour.

Invading Japanese troops enter China's ancient capital Peking in July, 1937. With a view to seizing the whole of China, Japan waged a brutal and unrelenting war against the Chinese until 1945. Millions of Chinese were killed.

With China torn by revolution in the 1920s, Japan's militarists viewed China, and in particular, its resource-rich northern region of Manchuria, as an obvious area for Japan to expand its territory by military force and thereby solve its raw material and population problems. However, the Japanese imperial government was not responsive to proposals for military aggression against China at this time.

Between 1925 and 1928, Chinese nationalists under the banner of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) had begun to unite all of China's far-flung regions under a Kuomintang Nationalist government. Japan's militarists feared that a unified China under a Nationalist government would block Japanese territorial expansion into Manchuria where Japan had massive commercial interests and had achieved significant political influence. In 1927, Japanese militarists demanded action by the imperial government to block the Chinese Nationalist movement reaching Manchuria. The militarist Prime Minister Tanaka responded by sending Japanese troops to China's Shantung province in 1928 to block a union of Manchuria with the Chinese Nationalist cause.

Militarists launch Japan on the path of aggression by seizing Manchuria from China, 1931

Japan's economy was seriously affected by the Great Depression which began in 1929, and with revenues from Japan's commercial interests in China's Manchurian region thought to be under threat from Chinese nationalism, military and civilian extremists found Japan's imperial government now willing to listen to their demands for a move against Manchuria.

In 1931, militarists dominated the imperial government, and all that they required was a plausible excuse for military action in Manchuria. Rather than wait for such an excuse to occur, the Kwantung Army extremists appear to have decided to create one. On the night of 18 September 1931, a bomb was exploded on the track of the Japanese-owned South Manchuria Railway. The explosion caused very little damage, and no loss of life. The Kwantung Army immediately blamed "Chinese terrorists", and without waiting for approval from the imperial government in Tokyo or producing any proof of its allegation, its troops seized the Manchurian city of Mukden. Proclaiming a need to protect Japanese life and property, and again without approval from Tokyo, the Kwantung Army then undertook the full conquest of Chinese Manchuria. The Kwantung Army
simply ignored efforts by the imperial government in Tokyo to bring its military aggression in Manchuria to a halt. When Prime Minister Inukai tried to secure Emperor Hirohito's intervention to bring the Kwantung Army back under government control, he was assassinated by naval officers in May 1932.

When the Kwantung Army had completed its conquest of Manchuria, it converted this vast former region of China into a Japanese puppet state called Manchukuo in September 1932.

Japan occupies and annexes China's Jehol Province in 1933

China complained to the League of Nations which called on member states to withhold recognition of Manchukuo. Japan used this mild reprimand as an excuse to withdraw from the League, and freed from the restraints of the League's Charter, Japanese armies then invaded areas of northern China adjoining the former Chinese Manchuria. Japanese troops occupied China's northern Jehol province and stopped short of the former Chinese capital Peking when a truce was arranged. Under the terms of the truce, Chinese troops were barred from the areas of northern China occupied by Japanese armies. In 1933, Japan formally incorporated China's Jehol province into its puppet state Manchukuo. With two hostile armies facing each other on Chinese territory, the Japanese militarists had set the stage for further conflict with China when a suitable pretext occurred.

Army extremists attempt to overthrow Japan's Imperial Government in 1936

By the mid-1930s, army extremists had become impatient with Japan's existing political and economic structures which they felt were impeding Japan's progress towards military dominance of Asia. They resolved to destroy the power of the politicians and industrialists who were the emperor's chief advisers. On 26 February 1936, fanatical army officers assassinated two of Emperor Hirohito's key advisers, and army mutineers surrounded the Japanese Foreign Office and held much of Tokyo city for three days. Prime Minister Keisuke Okada escaped the assassins' bullets when they killed his brother-in-law by mistake. The plot to overthrow civilian government failed when the Army High Command refused to support the mutineers. The leaders of the mutiny were persuaded to commit suicide to avoid a trial which would have embarrassed the army. The most extreme military leaders were then replaced by ones who were prepared to support civilian government.

Despite the failure of the army mutiny, the imperial government was still dominated by militarists and committed to extension of Japan's borders by military force. In pursuance of this aim, the imperial government
formulated the following major foreign policy objectives for Japan: Russian pressure on Japan's empire from the north needed to be resisted; the military conquest of the whole of China should be undertaken; and further territorial expansion to the south should be undertaken to seize for Japan the wealth and raw materials available in the South-East Asian colonies of Britain, France and Holland.

**Japan declares for itself a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere"**

As Japan's war in China continued through 1938, the United States hoped that the mounting costs of the seemingly unending war would cause Japan to review its policy towards China and withdraw its troops. When this did not occur, the Americans began to take economic measures against Japan. Those measures included denial of certain war-related raw materials, termination of trading privileges, and assistance to China's Nationalist government at Chungking.

These economic measures only succeeded in hardening the attitudes of Japan's militarists, and increasing their hostility towards the United States, which they felt was meddling in Japan's natural sphere of interest in East Asia. The Japanese imperial government responded to the American economic measures by declaring its intention to found a "New Order" in Asia by establishing a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The New Order would involve a Japanese-controlled political and economic grouping of countries for the purpose of supplying Japan with the raw materials needed by Japan's industries, and in particular, its war-related industries, and accepting Japanese exports in return. The list of countries included in Japan's New Order included Australia, Burma, the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), Malaya, New Guinea, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand. The Japanese made it quite clear that any country resisting inclusion in their Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere would be treated as an enemy of Japan.

By signing the Tripartite Pact on 27 September 1940, Japan allied itself with the Axis Powers, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, in a partnership for world domination by military aggression.

As tensions increased between Japan and the United States, the Japanese began looking for allies who would support aggression by Japan.

**Hitler and Mussolini bring Japan into the Axis Partnership for world domination**

By 1940, Adolf Hitler was well aware of the increasing tensions between the United States and Japan. The United States had embarked upon a massive increase in the size of its navy, and the Nazi leader was also aware of the risk that the United States might enter the war in Europe on Britain's side. Faced with this risk, Hitler decided to offer Japan a place in the German and Italian alliance for world domination embodied in the Rome-Berlin Axis.

For its part, Japan recognised the threat to its plans for further territorial expansion in East Asia created by the expansion of the American navy. The non-aggression pact signed by Germany and the Soviet Union in August 1939 made it essential for Japan to strengthen its ties with Germany and Italy, and to take steps to remove the Soviet menace to Manchukuo.

On 27 September 1940, Germany, Italy and Japan signed the Tripartite Pact. The agreement recognised Japan's self-assumed role in establishing a "New Order" in East Asia, and provided for mutual assistance should any one of the three powers be attacked by another country not already involved in the European conflict or the war in China. The Germans and Italians wanted the pact to convey a clear warning to the United States that it would face war with Japan if it entered the war in Europe on Britain's side.

**The Americans move their Pacific Fleet from California to Hawaii**

Recognising that diplomacy and economic sanctions had failed to persuade Japan to withdraw its armies from China, in 1940 the American government decided to move its Pacific Fleet from California to Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian islands. It was designed to demonstrate the naval power available to the United States in the Pacific region, and hopefully act as a deterrent to Japanese aggression against American, British and Dutch
possessions in East Asia. The action was not without significant risk, because it placed the fleet within striking distance of Japan's own powerful navy.

**Admiral Yamamoto plans the destruction of the United States Pacific Fleet**

In early 1941, Admiral Yamamoto was appointed Commander-in-Chief of Japan's Combined Fleet, and immediately took issue with the cautious plan of the Japanese Naval General Staff to limit naval operations to action against British and Dutch naval forces defending their country's territory in South-East Asia. He did not believe that the Americans would stand idly by while Japan attacked and seized British and Dutch possessions in South-East Asia. He also believed that Japan could not sustain an all out war with the United States for more than one year.

With these firm convictions, Yamamoto began planning a surprise carrier-launched air attack on the United States Pacific Fleet to coincide with Japan's move against British and Dutch possessions in South-East Asia. Yamamoto's plan for a surprise attack on the United States Pacific Fleet at Hawaii would involve a strike force which included Japan's six largest and best aircraft carriers. His task was rendered much easier by the United States government's decision to relocate its Pacific Fleet from California to Hawaii. As Yamamoto saw it, the destruction of the American's Pacific Fleet would give Japan time to seize the Philippines, Malaya, British Borneo, Burma and the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), and gain access to the oil, minerals, rubber and other resources that Japan lacked. He was hopeful that, with its Pacific Fleet destroyed or crippled, the Americans would be willing to accept a peace settlement that would allow Japan to keep its new conquests in East Asia.

1. Explain Japan's resource issue prior to WWII.
2. Why did Japan's militarists think gaining Manchuria could help Japan? Where is Manchuria?
3. Why did Japan's government become willing to listen to demands for military action in Manchuria?
4. When and why did Japan fully conquer Manchuria?
5. Where is Jehol Province? When was it invaded and how does this event help us understand the events of WWII?
6. Why does the overthrow of Japan's imperial government in 1936 help explain Japanese military aggression during WWII?
7. How did the US respond to increased Japanese aggression? Why do you think the US cared about what was happening in Asia? (Hint: The US granted the Philippines independence in 1946)
8. Why did Japan, Italy, and Germany sign the "Tripartite Pact"?
9. Why did the US move it's Pacific fleet to Hawaii?
10. Why did Admiral Yamamoto choose to attack the US Pacific fleet in Hawaii?